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Feature Story

A FORTUNE TELLER'S SECRET

By GLADYS HALL

"THE MYSTIC EMBLEM" is the Title of Our Next Feature Story

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A STORY BASED ON THE ART OF PALMISTRY.

By GLADYS HALL

CHAPTER ONE

THE HOUSE OF SILENCE

THERE are certain houses in certain locales of which one exclaims instinctively, "It is haunted!" or "It looks like a house of ill-omen!" One feels a shudder and knows not why. The supernatural comes to the mind; red, ghastly things; pale, sinister things—the sort of things that congeal the blood in the veins, prickle the scalp, cramp the limbs as in a sweating nightmare. Such a house was the House of Silence, or, as it was often called instead, "The House of the Cursed Hand."

In passing it, gay parties would become unaccountably silenced, voices would pitch low, small boys would gather together and invent creepy tales about the things that took place therein. Sooner would they have spent a night among the yew-trees in the mouldering church-yard than within eyeshot of the House of the Cursed Hand. The upbuilding of the town had fallen away when it came to the boundaries of the ill-fated estate. Not even the healthiest-minded of the village cared to spend their days under the pale eye of the old mansion that stood like some leprous spot among its yews.

A few of the most ancient villagers remembered in the antebellum days when things had been different up at the House of Silence, or else they doddered so near to the grave and that which lay beyond it that their memories were mere inventions to pass the time of day. A few remembered the present inmate, old Colonel Ravenel, when he had been a young blade, the pride of the Southland. There had been fire to him, so they were told, romance and a cavalier manner with the women that was unforgetable. Many a yellow-withered crone, they trowed, still teetered over crumbling letters, yellower far than they. Then there had been a lapse; something horrible

must have happened—blood and death and unspeakable things; a gypsy trail that wound like a bleeding wound over the hills and away, and the silence, the fearful, scarring silence that wrapped the place about to this day in the dread fashion of a winding-cloth.

Nobody knew; few dared to surmise. Colonel Ravenel rode his blooded steeds no longer in the erstwhile way. Now and then he was seen brooding over the grave of his wife, who lay where his own hands had placed her, under the tallest, finest yew. The slaves had drifted away—some with their new freedom, some palsied with fear of the thing or things that held sway in the awful house. It was reported among the negroes and even among the better class of whites that five of the ex-slaves had almost turned white before leaving the colonel's employ. When pressed for something definite on the subject, they had simply shaken their heads and got out through clicking teeth, "Jes' it, sah; we-all dunno."

One negro girl, who, it was said by the darkies, had given birth to a monkey with gypsy earrings gimleted in its ears some few months after her flight from the House of Silence, affirmed that the colonel's daughter Fragoletta went about always with her left hand bound around in a linen rag, and looked neither to the right nor to the left. She said, furthermore, that the instant the girl evinced an interest in anything, something like a moan went up through the whole place, and throughout the uncanny sound the colonel would be heard keening, "In your tenderest spot, in your tenderest spot, in your tenderest spot."

But of course these were accepted chiefly as negro superstitions and discounted appropriately.

"It is probably nothing more grievous than a financial mess," conjectured a visitor to the village one time, a breezy New Yorker, who held all tragedies to be the results of gold, all joys forthcoming from the same source. The day after his utterance a gypsy, who came from God knows where, told his fortune, and, when she had done, dropped a coin into his palm. It was red-hot and blistered his flesh. When he would have given chase to her in a just tempest of rage she bared her hideous yellow fangs at him and warned him, "Young master, make no guess where guesswork is a sacrilege."

He left for his native New York on the next train, and it was a noteworthy fact that he made no further flippant comment on the miserable home of the Ravenels.

Some motherly women, with true clucking-hen hearts, had organized at various times in the interests of the girl, of whom only her name, Fragoletta, was known.

"What a truly terrible thing for a young thing like that," they exclaimed with, no doubt, satisfied glances at their own romping young daughters, "shut up there with that frightful old man, who looks like something that has crawled out from the church-yard, never speaking, no music, no laughter, no beaux, no pretties! Poor child, poor child!"

Their timorous, truly valiant excursions to the House of Silence were, however, totally in vain, even after they had made the ascent to where the broken gate hung on its hinges between two pillars of peeling, dead-gray white, trod fearfully up the path where toads and queer lizards and creeping things held low revelry, mounted the steps to the wide veranda faced by the same peeling pillars, and lifted the knocker that was coated with thickish green. They were greeted by silence, just that—a silence that settled even on their milk-fed, comfortable spirits like a nasty, material pall; a *thick* silence; a silence that was the outcome of some monstrous thing. The blinds were generally half-closed, or hanging, also peeling and forlorn on hinges that creaked eerily. The rains of many heavy years had blurred the windows so that, even if some unwary mortal had been venturesome enough to peer in, nothing could have been seen. Dank weeds cluttered the grounds, a few rocks flapped dismally among the yews, and owls nested where the rooks were not.

It was known in the village that when a gypsy caravan wound down the narrow trail that skirted the mansion at the extreme right, some unseen hand pulled the creaking shutters securely to, some unseen presence made pitiful pretense of fastening the inadequate gate, and no smoke curled wanly from the chimneys during the time the gypsies were in camp.

About the time this tale begins, however, the village had all but lost interest in the House of Silence; it had been too long, too impenetrable a silence. Mysteries were all very well if eventually they cleared up and all lived happily ever after; but this mystery apparently was of the endless variety. The yellowed, half-dead, fateful-eyed colonel, whose sole diversion seemed to be in mumbling over his wife's grave or keening uncanny things throughout the house, would doubtless crumble it with him into his tomb, which doubtless his daughter would dig with her linen-bound right hand; then she in turn would carry it on, she and the one servant who did the most menial labors for them, and who was by now untouched by the curse of the place, since it had long ago unhinged her poor mind for all time.

Therefore, decided the villagers, why waste any more time on the House of Silence when there are always fresh and spicy scandals seeing the light of day and the pleasant harboring of the receptive ear?

So, save when a gypsy caravan wound its bright way down the trail at the right and the House of Silence seemed to shudder and draw almost moaningly into itself, people had forgotten it.

But nothing stands still ever; even though imperceptibly, things are moving, moving; it takes a glacier a thousand years sometimes to creep on its predestined way, but creep it does, and yields in the end its careful dead. So with the House of Silence, all imperceptibly, events were moving, moving; the colonel toward a grave beneath the yew, where lay these many years the wife of his cavalier youth; Fragoletta toward—— But shall we say? Over the trail and far away, true to the gypsy patéran, a caravan, like the winding blood from a wound, immutable, fateful, scanning destinies in the stars, scanning destinies in the palm, wherein is writ the mysteries of life, the hidden tales of death, the keys to past, to future and beyond.

CHAPTER TWO

BEHIND BARRED DOORS

ONCE past the door with its unused knocker of thickish green—what?

A long, dark hall, with tarnished sconces along the walls; a fine, old piece or two; to the right a long and splendid living-room, where, gleaming dully, stood a harp, too, unused; over the ample fireside hung portraits, indistinguishable for mould and dust; to the left was the dining hall in the same indistinguishable state—from what could be seen, the home of wealth, of culture and refinement, of blue-blood and ancestry, all smitten with a blight. Up-stairs most of the rooms had fallen into disuse. The one the colonel occupied had never been penetrated even by Fragoletta. Sometimes the crazed negro gained egress on some cleaning mission and could be heard laughing maniacally within.

And Fragoletta? I think if the breezy young New Yorker had known what a rarity of beauty the House of Silence held he would not have fled so precipitately back to his safe New York, nor been so confident that gold is the root of all evil and the flower of all good—save it might be the pure gold that grew on the doomed head of Fragoletta.

Perhaps the youths of the village would not have gone so smugly to court their Phyllis or their Amaryllis had they known of the great beauty of Fragoletta Ravenel, or they might have resuscitated the by-gone age of chivalry and fought the sickly demons that kept guard o'er her with lances clean and bright. But no one knew anything except that there was a girl there who could not be more than twenty summers, who never spoke nor sang nor danced, nor had apparently any desire to do so, and that

her hand—her left hand—was mummified in a winding-cloth, like something horridly dead, not at a great distance a very engaging figure for love-making; and the youths of the present day and age are not prone to battle with dread specters, probable horrors of limb and feature, when everywhere beauty intact is beckoning and calling.

So none of the male sex had ever attempted to invade the privacy, or test the beauty of the daughter of the House of Silence. She was left eternally, totally and utterly alone.

Supposing there had been some Valiant, supposing the lure of her lonely, stricken youth had touched some heart, no matter whose, what would they have seen?

They would have had to follow her to her own lair had they ever gained admittance at the outermost portal, for only there was the mould absent and the dust in abeyance; only there did it become evident that life did exist in the house—vicarious, repressed, o'ercast—but life reaching out with hands still warm, with blood still red for the sane, safe things of it. Fragoletta's rooms—a bedchamber and a small study—showed that. They had been her mother's rooms, but she liked, rather than minded, that. She thought, not without reason, that her poor, dead mother could harm her, hurt her less than her yellow, terrifying father or the crazed negress. A fine old four-poster bed occupied one corner of her room, and she herself kept clean and fresh the faded chintz with which it was canopied and covered. There was a dressing-table done in the same indeterminate pattern, once gay with birds and flowers, and a couple of low chairs. A faded drugget held court in the center of the hand-polished floor. The room, like all of the others, was lit by sconces on the wall—when it was lit, which was spookily seldom. Jude, the crazed negress, made tallow candles herself and allotted them sparingly to the colonel and to Fragoletta. The girl's den was tenanted by a few bookshelves and the dozen dry volumes on technicalities her father had permitted her and a writing-desk. At this writing-desk Fragoletta spent all of her days. Something was in her that wanted to come forth, something that was not at all of this life nor this place nor these people—her yellow father and the maniac negress, who laughed so inordinately when in her father's rooms.

Lastly one would have looked at Fragoletta, or firstly perhaps, and one would have marveled—marveled that anything so undeniably lovely, so warm, so slenderly vital, so palpably created for love and joy, June roses and soft wooings, could have sprung from the mould and horror of the House of Silence; something similar, perhaps, to the incomparably glowing, fragrant flowers that spring up from a grave.

She was tall and rounded and as gracile as a reed. Her skin was the white that has the glow of the velvet white rose, pink-veined; her eyes were like violets that have not yet yearned to the sun; her hair was living gold and clung and banded her head as though loath to leave even for a fraction of an inch so dear a thing; her voice was the only strange thing about her. It was like broken cadences of music, which, if pieced together, might make a charming symphony, but which was broken pitifully as it stood; and her mouth, while red and cupped, was cold—still cold.

There was no wonder in her eyes, no consciousness of resignation. One does not wonder, it seems, nor feel resigned to that which has been since one's natal hour. There had just never been anything else, that was all; never anything at all save this mouldy, dusty house, Jude, her withered father and herself; there had never been anything save this silence. For aught she knew, silence was the way things were. Being human, she sometimes wondered who it was bestowed a voice upon one if the voice were not to be used. Jude used hers, of course, and her father his; but Fragoletta had a feeling that she had rather preserve the silence than be imitative in either of those directions.

At meal-times Jude would brush off places for the colonel and herself and place an unappetizing meal before them. Her father would eat in utter stillness. Occasionally she herself would make some request in the broken music of her voice.

And then, almost always, her father would glance up at her with his cavernous eyes and whisper in an unaccustomed, hoarse voice: "Your mother, her voice; but young and fated."

As a natural result of such an existence Fragoletta was extremely slow in developing. Those instincts in her, which must surely have denied this mode of living—knowledge or no, notwithstanding—were tardy in asserting themselves. Only of late had she felt within her doubts and questionings, only recently found herself eyeing mad Jude with a certain repulsion, watching her father with a questioning glance.

On one occasion she had spied the goodly women, who had delegated themselves into a rescue committee—object, herself. Generally she had not seen them at all.

At the evening meal that night she had asked her father: "They are women-folk; they wear skirts like me, but there is no linen binding their left hand, so that they may not use it. Why is that?"

Her father had looked at her till she had thought his eyes must surely leave his head. "Do you question me?" he asked, and his voice struck terror to her breast. "Has it begun, then—the wondering and the asking—the last great torture for me, the last great fear?"

And then the slow, dreadful tears had welled out of the caverns of his eyes and traced mocking by-ways down the furrows of his cheeks, and Fragoletta had hastily disclaimed any interest at all in the ladies or their habits.

"But they had pleasant voices," she confided to old Jude afterward, "and they didn't wear straight, coarse, scratchy things like mine. I am beginning—yes, I am beginning to wonder and wonder and wonder. How can I help it? I cannot see any other people, when I know there are other people who see one another; I cannot see even my own hand, and I couldn't see myself if I hadn't saved the bit of mirror out of the large one my father smashed in my room, and I like to look at myself. Jude and my father offend my sight; and I—I myself—please my sight. I am quite different.

"My father was different, too, once. He admitted at one time that that picture over the fireplace was himself when he was young. He was smooth then and black-haired and fair to the eyes, and he wore finer raiment than he gives to me. Yes, I am beginning to wonder there is something very wrong."

And meanwhile, down the road that trailed like a thin ribbon to the extreme right of the House of the Cursed Hand, a gypsy caravan, like the winding blood from a wound, events were moving, moving.

CHAPTER THREE

THE GYPSY TRAIL

IT trailed along the road under the blood-red of the sun—motley, lazy, picturesque, symbolic—the covered caravans, from within which glimpses of gaily, ragged gowns and bandanas, the brass jangle of an earring, the sound of guttural laughter, the flash of white teeth, or the occasional gleam of black eyes as an impudent, tan face thrust itself forth. Now and then a stopping by the way to tell some pedestrian that he was to meet a blonde lady, lovelier than the daughter of Venus, on the morrow; that he was to inherit a fortune; take a trip and achieve great glories in all ways possible of achievement.

As the caravan picked up after one of these and trailed its slow way over the ribbon-like road Tarantella, the aged queen, sighed and leaned back against the much-bedecked bed she occupied most of her time now. Lounging by her was her young grandson Romano, to whom she had bequeathed, by right of lineage, the sovereignty.

Romano deserves at least a mention. He was tall and finely modeled, on slenderer lines than the indolent

gypsy of the present day; his hair was very straight and very black, with odd blue lights on it when it was caught by the gold light of the sun or the full silver of the moon; his skin was tanned, too, gypsy-fashion, or simply out-of-doors; but his eyes were amazingly blue, almost a pale blue, and they looked out on the world with a peculiar restiveness, a singular quality of unfulfilment.

"There is that in your son which is never content, Queen Mother," he told her once in his whimsical way, "nor the trail nor you nor swarthy Julie Joy can well content me. I feel I am not here by rights."

"There are your own people," his grandmother would tell him almost roughly for the adoration of him that always softened her tones. "There is the sun above you to warm to dancing your Romany blood; there is the long trail and the goodly camping; there is the sun to kiss you to fulfilment; there are the stars to read when all books must somehow fail; there is the moon to touch you to amorousness for the kiss of Julie Joy. Eh, but you are beloved king of your tribe, the full-blooded Romanys."

"And has there never been intermingling, Queen Mother?" he asked her once.

The hag peered at him out of eyes grown dim from the reading of many palms. "The gypsy blood to the gypsy blood," she repeated sternly. Then, taking his young, wistful face between her palms, she studied him. "But the gypsy blood is a vagrant blood," she answered; "yes, some of the best of the Southland and the culled flowering of the cold North and the Romanys, it is so, it is so."

"And in me, Queen Mother?" The lad studied her eagerly, and then he spoke quickly, almost pleadingly. "The wanderlust is best, of course," he said, "and the far trail and the distant fires and the never a care to bide; but mother-o'-mine, there is that in me—traitor, if you wish—that cries for a fireside that stays; a woman with hair like the sun and skin like the warmed milk the little babies drink; a woman who speaks like soft music and moves like the slender white rays of the moon that does not kiss me to madness, mother, for the arms of Julie Joy. These are my longings, mother; these and the books I buy when our trail leads us by the towns—the books that tell of men who have not wandered, children of the sun, but stayed and carved their names in the rock, not scribbled it over the ever restless road. It is the blood in me, think ye, that came when the Romanys answered the call of their gypsy blood—vagrant blood—following the farthest trail?"

"It may be, it may be," the gypsy hag crooned mournfully, stroking meanwhile the dark head of her grandson, the king. Presently, "It is not as it used to be," she said; "the trail goes ever shorter and the fires ever dimmer. Gypsying, well, and the fortunes we tell, they, too, are going, going. There was a time, I mind, I have foretold the destinies of kings by the life-lines on their palms. I have presaged the blood of murder, the forebode of death, the love that curses like a pestilence the withering of the young, the blighting of infants; and now—eh, Romano?—it is a silly thing, a meeting, a fortune. Nay, nay, gypsying is——"

The hag nodded for a few minutes, as though living again in her aged slumber the fame she had once enjoyed. Romano touched her gently.

"Eh? I was saying," she said, "I was saying there was the famous case of the Baroness de Cercy. In the girdle of Venus I found there the one good spot in her—the spot that love might call—and it did, it did, and she caught love and held it to her breast, that had been cold and barren before. The papers printed it; the 'Ice Baroness' they named her; but I foretold her that the girdle of Venus is not there for naught, and I have read the truth into the lines of Apollo, the Via Lasciva, the Seven Lesser Lines. Oh, I have guided life destinies in my day, I mind me; I have counted the death hour on the bracelets of life. Yea, I have tolled the knell e'en to the very hour, the days when Tarantella was young and her eyes were bright."

The caravan crawled slowly on. In front of them could be heard the gay, rollicking voice of Julie Joy raised in a love song of the Romanys—raised in the hope that Romano, her king, would hear it and come at its calling.

But Romano did not heed; he was staring, staring at the slipping ribbon of the road. The sun was waning on it; soon the white moon would own it, and he saw, in his dreaming, the dancing of white feet on it, the beckoning of white hands and hair as golden as the sun that kissed it.

Julie Joy sang on; she loved the King Romano—loved him with gypsy love, with woman love, with youth love and blood love and all of spirit there was in her; she loved him so that it would be a joy to her to run her sharp, keen dagger through his heart should ever it prove faithless. In the meantime she waited with all the patience there was in the ardent heart of her.

She had little to fear; from the towns nothing. Romano browsed among books in the towns; Julie laughed at the fear of books. What were they to her curls that gleamed like the evil in coals, to her eyes that even Romano had compared to the stars in the purplest night, to her lips that were red as red berries, or her breast that was velvet and warm?

For other women, there was only Carla in the tribe who could in any way compete with Julie Joy, and she was avowedly in love with Ned, the chum of Romano. Then there was, or had been, Tess, with her sloe-dark eyes and Bacchic dancing and thrilling voice; but she had married one of the tribe and was having babies appallingly and losing her rhythm and thrill and lure systematically. Julie Joy knew nothing of the dreams, moon-white dreams, of Romano; he did not tell them to her; he did not tell her anything at all save, absently, that her eyes were starry and her curls like living coals.

Night fell and another day dawned and the caravan crawled indolently on.

On the morning of the following day Queen Tarantella gave orders that no fortunes were to be told along the way. The tribe grumbled; there were various advertised "Seventh Daughter of the Nile," etc., among them, who would miss much silver on their palms by this edict.

"Why does your grandmother act so strange whenever we encamp near to this town, Romano?" Julie Joy asked Romano.

"How do you know that she does?" laughed Romano lazily. "We haven't been here for five years and more."

"I remember that time a little," retorted Julie, "and the others tell me of it. I recall my mother speaking of it. It is a tradition of the tribe that we come here at least once in five years, and we always do; I think perhaps she is afraid of the House of the Cursed Hand."

Romano seized her roughly by the wrist. "Remember that you speak of your queen," he said; "she grows old and feeble, her years are many and so are her honors; but her tribe pays her homage to the last, or Romano, Rex, knows why."

He drew himself full to his slender height and flashed his blue eyes at her. The girl stared, then her eyes grew humid, her lips parted; she bent near and took his hand.

"Romano," she pleaded, "why do you wait for me? Why do you make me wait? I love you. See, I tell you with no shame. They tell me, Carla and the others, that I must wait till the wooing is done me; but I am weary of waiting, man-o'-mine. I am young, but I am ready for love—unafraid, warm and eager. See how the scarlet of my mouth meets yours; see how my two eyes shine. Romano, it is a gypsy who makes shameless love to you; it is a gypsy love I give you here on the open trail, your woman, queen to your king—Romano!"

The blood of Romano pounded in his temples. Small wonder; there was a lure to Julie Joy. It was the ancient, light call of the blood—the gypsy call—here on the open road; and somehow Romano knew that, and something bade him to wait, to possess his soul in patience; his dream, his vision was waiting him. She would mean pain to his heart, he knew, a bitter tumult of his blood; but she would bring him an exquisitude of joy.

He shook his head. "I am not for you, little Julie Joy," he said. "Hark ye! for I owe you this by the love you have professed for me. Back on the old trails the Romany

blood met with the blood of the patrician Southland—the home blood, the safe blood—and it is that blood in me that is calling me, Julie Joy. It is the blood of the hearth-fire and the cloistered spots that speaks to me most surely. I am not for you, my girl, nor you for me. We camp together and we follow the longest trail; but as man and woman, my girl, we travel far apart."

The girl watched him like some stricken thing. She seemed to be hearing the words spoken in some hideous nightmare, materializing in her waking hours. This was her doom, sealed at his lips. The whole ardent course of her blood had turned to the blood of Romano and could not be turned back.

She leaned toward him again and this time her berry-red lips bared back from her strong, white teeth.

"You are my man," she said; "but give me your palm. See, it is written, it is written——"

The girl gave a scream and dropped in a dead swoon. Romano picked her up gently and bore her into his mother's caravan, where some three or four of the women of the tribe were gathered together. "Julie has need of your care," he said gravely. It was noticeable that he did not say Julie Joy. It seemed so paradoxical a thing, this limp, white creature from whom all the blood of joy seemed ebbed away. He heard the women muttering over her and turned away.

Outside he studied his palm a moment and then smiled. "I see a dream," he muttered; "a girl with a body like a moon ray and hair like the palest sun and eyes—sweet eyes, dear eyes—and I am to follow her through pain and sorrow and superstition and grief. There will be mould to clear away, decay and gloom that is prisoning her youth; but at last, at last, we two must surely triumph and the Romany king must come into his own."

The girl gave a scream and dropped in a dead swoon. Romano picked her up gently.

As he sat there brooding over his palm, the caravan mounted the crest of the hill that dropped again to the ribbon of road winding past the House of Silence. He could hear the women closing the flaps of his mother's caravan; he heard a sob strangle the girl Julie; he heard an owl call and a wind stir in the distant yews, and he smiled.

At her window in the House of Silence, Fragoletta crouched with distended eyes. Here, here was the gypsy caravan; now would Jude moan horribly all night long, now would her yellow father mutter and groan and talk. The small light the house admitted generally would be barred out. There would be no cooking done, they would be as a tomb—cut off from light, from air, from any food save the barest amount to keep the blood circulating in their bodies.

This was the horror-time—the time that stood out beyond all others. Fragoletta pressed her eyes against the window, knowing that any moment her father would be aware of the approach, and the tremulous, terrible edict would go forth. She wanted to look on the horror that brought all this about.

And as she looked her lips smiled outside of her volition. She caught glimpses of gay colors; heard, ever so faintly, the rollicking of a banjo; felt, all unaccountably, a warmth steal about her heart.

And as she looked the king, the boy Romano, stood erect in his caravan, balanced himself, and sprang into the road. He stood there silhouetted, his shirt open at the white column of his throat, bared and strong, his black hair shining with blue lights, his crimson scarf girdling his lean hips.

Fragoletta stared at first uncomprehendingly, then, for some reason, tears welled into her eyes and fell like a cascade of pearls over the white smoothness of her cheeks. Her hand fluttered to her breast and stayed there; she caught her breath almost violently.

Beneath, she heard her father's voice: "Jude, Jude, Jude!" Then the sound of the old negress moaning cruelly and the sound of the mouldy shutters closing on their rusty and rotting hinges.

She pulled her shutters to, and then, eyes closed as though to hold the vision they had seen, she stumbled across the room and barred her own door, after which she crossed to a corner of the room and sank down in a huddled heap on the floor, eyes still shut, and gave herself up to thinking of the gypsy boy.

On the road Romano stood still, his eyes straining to the window over which the shutter had been pulled. "Sacre!" he muttered. "Never have I seen such a glory of sunshine before, the palest, purest gold."

CHAPTER FOUR

THE AWAKENING OF FRAGOLETTA

FOR a long while Fragoletta sat crouched in the corner of her room, eyes still tightly shut. She arose automatically to admit the eerily moaning Jude, stood tense while, still lamenting, the poor creature pulled faster still the closed shutters and made grotesque motions of fastening them and automatically closed the door and locked it again after the shambling footsteps.

She wanted to think. She became aware for the first time that she never had thought before. Why—she gave a sudden, irrepressible shudder of repulsion—she was fast becoming even as they were, her yellow father and her black slave—just horrid, slimy, half-dead—better dead—things; living with a noisome mystery, too noisome,

or too foolish, it would seem, to be given the light of day.

She began to feel a vague, then an acute, pity for herself; she began counting up her years on her fingers and felt a grim wonderment that she could even do that.

Way back in her very small years her father had morosely given her some very elementary instruction in the three Rs. Out of ponderous tomes—also heavy with dust and the peculiar, greenish mould, like that which coated her mother's headstone, that seemed to characterize the place—she remembered the instructions very vividly. Once there had been a simple sentence in the grammar-book about gypsies stealing little children, and her father had given a terrible, throaty scream and had summoned Jude, waving her—Fragoletta—frantically away, and had gulped down some strange wine Jude had brought, and then, like a man distraught, had seized her left hand and peered at it with glazing eyes. So far as she could remember there had been nothing very odd about her left hand. It had been, she seemed to remember, just a very ordinary little hand, more or less unkept. But her father had stared at it as though seeming to expect of the moist little palm an ultimate horror. That night old Jude had crept into her room, a nightmare figment, and had bound it in the linen rags, in which it had evermore remained. Fragoletta thought petulantly now of the exceeding trouble those linen binders had been. The rite observed the first night had evermore continued; every evening after she had crept into bed Jude would crawl, slink, creep in with her, remove the old linen and bind the offending hand up with fresh cloths.

Fragoletta had accepted the strange service as she had up to now accepted all the rest of the ritual of this house of infinite gloom.

She remembered that she had, tentative child-fashion, told her father that her hand didn't hurt, wasn't cut. So why should it be all bandaged up? He had given her the look she had learned to dread, had passed his hand over his sunken eyes and muttered almost incomprehensively to her:

"The dread; that is the thing that is killing me, gnawing me like a ghoul, sucking my blood like a leech!"

He had raised his voice on the word leech, and it had keened so horribly through the house that, accustomed as she was to horror and dread, the child had fled, quaking, to her rooms.

After that there were no more lessons; after that she had had to learn all over again to use her hand, cumbered as it always was now with the miniature windingsheet.

Twenty-one years she counted up; that was a long, dreary time to have spent, shut in from the light of day. She had always known that things were somehow wrong, but she had only sensed it, as it were, vaguely, and more or less passively. The women who had come as a charity delegation had made her aware of it; the sense she felt on her rare and furtive trips into the sunshine about the mansion brought it to her. Now and then the winging of a lark high into the blue gave her a sharp and bitter sense of contrast; but it had been all just sense. Never before had she thought consciously, knowingly; never before had realization smote her as it smote her to-day in the gallant figure of Romano, the gypsy.

The freedom of him, the great unfetteredness, the color—the warm and wonderful color—the rhythm, the poise, the grace and vividness.

Fragoletta pressed her poor bandaged hand tight—tight against her eyes as though she must keep in the beauty they had seen—as though she could not look again on mould and dull decay.

"I know what it all is," she murmured. "I was not made for this place; I was made for all out there, for the sunshine that made the dear little roses grow even among the weeds, for the blue, high places where the larkling sings, for he who stood against the blood-red sun and seemed to call, "Come, Fragoletta, come; we'll dance and sing the sun-time through. Come, Fragoletta, come!"

Far back in the Ravenel blood there had been stern stuff; far back, before things horrible and gruesome had come to suck the iron from their veins and shatter them with dank terrors, they had been a splendid, fighting stock—the very quintessence of the cold Confederacy. No one of them but what had bared a goodly sword and fought a goodly fight and looked on death and danger with a smile. There had been good blood in the savages, too—the savages, her mother's people; there had been Northern blood there—endurance, sanity and cool, steady vision. Fragoletta felt sure that had her mother lived she would never have permitted so frightful an existence as this had been.

The girl uncovered her eyes and stumbled in the dark to her little desk, fumbled for a moment, and brought forth a tiny tin daguerreotype. This she took over to the barred window, where, through the decaying shutters, some pale light filtered greenly through. Her eyes sought the face under its quaint old shower of curls eagerly. It was a sweet face—grave but cool, and optimistic and healthy. Fragoletta felt that she discerned pity now in the level gaze, as though the silenced lips were saying:

"Oh, my little girl, did I bring you into being for this?"

Fragoletta pressed her warm, red mouth to the cold, pictured one. "No," she whispered; "no, no, no! I am going to leave the House of Silence, dear; even though I come to you, it will be better than this, than my yellow father and mad Jude, who binds my hand at night. I am going to my father now and demand from him truth and light and reason. If he refuses me, then I am stronger, dear, than these rotting bolts and bars. I should have known all this before."

Fragoletta gave up a little unconscious prayer for strength in what she knew would be a hideous scene. How hideous even she could not imagine.

The prayer was an unconscious one, because God was an unknown to her. Once, in that faraway time of the three Rs, her father had told her a little about an Almighty Being, who had, so it seemed to her, sent her here for the express purpose of thereafter cursing her. As though afraid to tell so unmitigated a tale of the cruelty of his God, her father had told the story of His Only Son. The child Fragoletta, starving, famishing for the dower love which is childhood's inalienable right, had cried out eagerly:

"Oh, I can love Him then; I can love Him!"

The result had been her father's hasty disclaimer of all that he had said and an exhortation, terrible in its lashed frenzy, never, never to feel any love for anything nor anybody, as she valued the life that her body held and what peace of soul she, an accursed being, could hope for.

Fragoletta had not found that hard until to-day. There had certainly been nothing and no one to love in the House of Silence. One does not love an unlovely cemetery nor the gaunt things that people it; one does not love a yellow horror nor yet a black maniac. Fragoletta had always felt an immense pity for Jude. There were all but obliterated traces of a kind, faithful black heart in the poor creature's twisted body; a mothering, ample love for her "chilluns"; a fidelity that, in very fact, had driven her to insanity with "ole marse" rather than desert him and the mansion house, on whose once fair acres had stood the little, old cabin where she had first seen the light of day.

But to-day, with the coming of Romano over the ribbon road, the light of the whole world changed. Fragoletta knew that she loved at last—loved the flaming, challenging figure who had given to her her heritage, given to her the will to think, to feel, to dare and do. What though the heritage be pain? What though it be tears that were dyed with blood? What though it mean death itself? At the least it was not this; at the least he had shot her heart through with a quivering thrill, had charged her body like an electric thing, had torn away, with the sight of him, the ghastly cerements she had ever worn. He had come just in time; a little longer and she would have yellowed like the doomed colonel, or gone mad and moan-

ing like poor Jude; a little longer and there had been no need for love, no need for sunshine and the singing of the lark.

Fragoletta rose and stretched her cramped limbs; she drew a long, shuddering breath and looked about the dull room, lit greenly, paly, from the mouldering blinds. She knew that she would not see this room again, for she did not know how long—perhaps not until it, too, had crumbled into the immemorial dust.

Then she turned and unbolted the door; she was going to her father to dare him to fling wide the shutters, to fill the House of Silence with the tintabulation of the music of her youth, or else——

CHAPTER FIVE

THE WARNING

AS Fragoletta crept noiselessly—as was her wont, since the pattering of her baby feet had been dulled and forbidden—she saw the House of the Cursed Hand for the first time with her new eyes.

The shudder that went through her almost rent her asunder. She was seeing it now with the eyes of the villagers, as a place too ghastly, too frightful for endurance. The green mould turned her stomach; the sight of a bat winging blindly, furrily, in the obscurity of the cobwebs in the lower hall dizzied her with a sick terror. The thickish dust aroused in her mild spirit a sense of fierce rebellion. How dared her father, living as he did, no matter with what a pall of mystery and terror, in this world of undeniable sunshine and beauty—how dared he permit the utter revoltingness of all this? Not the fault of poor Jude. Oh, no! His fault there, too, that he had permitted the poor black's insanity; not her fault, for who could stand the horror of him when he keened through the house if any one inadvertently hit him upon one of his weakest spots?

No; he had entombed himself. Well, that was of his own volition, or, if not of his own, then of agencies over which neither she nor mad Jude had any control. Surely, no one expected the living sacrifice in this enlightened age.

The wrath which her new eyes gave her, gave her, too, an added courage to approach her father—the courage a just rage always inspires. She felt that she could use her indignation as a weapon, that it would banish timidity and face down the horrors which he would doubtless summon to his aid. Not now should he send her, quivering and crawling with nameless terrors, to her greenish rooms, not while there in the sunlight the flaming figure waited, calling to her, "Fragoletta, come!"

The yellowed colonel was sitting in his den in a tremendous winged chair, once, like most else in the old manse, tapestried and gay; faded peacocks strutted about his bowed head, dim outlines of gay castles and sweeping trains of olden, splendid ladies, held dim revelry. Over the marble mantel before which—for some obscure reason, since never in Fragoletta's time had the cheer of a fire beaconed it—his chair was drawn, hung a portrait of her mother. It had been done, Fragoletta had gathered, from mad Jude's weird spells of information and her father's occasional funereal information, before she had married. She had laughing lips in the portrait and a laughing, tender mouth; there was sunshine in her bearing and spring-time in her smile. Fragoletta had often wondered if, before she died, the chill prescience of this mould and gloom had chilled the happy laughter of her soul; she hoped not.

"Father"—Fragoletta approached him quietly; she waited for him to answer, which he did by jerking his sparse, white, singularly skull-like head back suddenly, staring at her with that look of impending terror, letting his gaze drop to her bandaged hand and then settling still further in his chair. After he had gone through these preliminary contortions, all too painfully familiar by now, Fragoletta drew up a small otterman and sat near to him.

"I want to talk to you," she said.

The old man began to shake. Fragoletta saw the imminence of the keening groans and lamentations that always brought old Jude, also moaning, with the strange wine, and that finally resulted in her self-willed banishment from the unpleasant scene.

She laid a firm hand—her right hand—on his coat-sleeve. It cost her a palpable effort to do so, and she realized this with a pang. If it cost her an effort, her father repaid it with a shudder.

"Not your hand, Fragoletta," he muttered; "not—not—that."

"Father"—the girl's generally broken tones were singularly firm; the iron on the proud, old blood had rallied and was standing her in good stead now—"father, listen; because you are not going to frighten me out of here today and neither is mad Jude nor—nor—anything at all, there isn't any use in your looking at me like that. I am going to stay and talk to you. I am twenty-one, father, or thereabouts, and I've never talked to you nor to any one on earth yet, and I'm going to begin now.

"I don't know, father, how I happen to be able to talk at all—I, whom you have shut out from all the world, the sunshine and the flowers, the laughter and the singing that would have made me happy; but it only shows that we were not always like this. Perhaps it is the spirit of my mother who speaks in me to-day."

The old man rose in his chair as if to menace her; his yellow, wrinkled face worked ominously.

Fragoletta kept her great wood-violet eyes straight upon him. The firm voice, the desperation she had cloaked under gentle determination, contrasted oddly with the fairness of her, the apparent frailty that had won for her her title of Fragoletta.

"There isn't a bit of use in your trying to strike me, father," she said quietly. "I am stronger than you are, and besides, whatever you have become, you are a gentleman, remember, and a Southerner."

The old man was regarding her now with an open amazement; that it battled back and forth with a lunatic fear and terror did not conceal it.

Fragoletta pressed her point; she felt a shrinking fear of being laid upon by those parchment, talon hands; she did not fear their material strength, but she did not know what supernatural agency they might be able to summon at will.

"A gentleman," she reminded him, "never strikes a woman."

The colonel rubbed his hands together; his lips twitched.

"It is better," he got out finally in his voice, that always seemed to come from some unlovely, cavernous depth, "to strike them off sometimes than to accede to them. Ruin is what comes of acceding to them—ruin and blood——"

"Father," Fragoletta cut him short, "you know I am going to talk to you, don't you, and ask you questions and press for answers? You are not so beyond all reason that you do not know that when it comes to you. I want you to tell me why you have kept me like this; I want you to tell me about my mother, why she died, when she died; I want you to tell me why you have had Jude bind up my hand, when I recall perfectly there was nothing unusual about it. It is all but paralyzed now from practical disuse. I want you to tell me why you live in this disgusting, dirty, mouldy, tomb-like place; you, who were once, from all your portraits, so fine and beautiful—and your mother was and your father.

"If you were fine and beautiful when you were young, if you danced and sang and knew my pretty, laughing mother, why have you made this living death for me?

"Father, something that is in me tells me that no one has a right to do with anybody's life what you have done with mine, and if they do, then they must be called to an accounting, and they must answer."

Silence—silence like the furry impact of the bat's wings among the cobwebs.

Fragoletta leaned forward on her otterman and shook him.

"You had better speak, father," she warned him, "else you shall not have another chance."

This seemed to rouse him.

He turned and she saw that she had his attention at least, that he seemed waiting for her to continue.

"Those women," she said, "who have come here several times to see me, I suppose—such nice women, with soft dresses and soft smiles and eyes that were kind and serene—why did you and Jude hasten me away, refuse to permit me to so much as look at them? Why am I different from all of them, from every one?"

The old colonel roused with an effort; no love lit the cavern of his eyes for this fair creature, who pleaded so strongly, so movingly for her simple heritage of sunshine and laughter. In fact, there seemed a baleful gleam in his eyes, an aversion; he kept his gaze with evident difficulty from the limply bandaged hand.

"There is a curse upon you," he croaked, "a curse of blood; you cannot escape it, you cannot avert it. It is graven into your flesh; your spirit is soaked with it as a rag is soaked with bad blood. You have, therefore, no right—no right, I say—to sun nor singing. You belong here with me, in the mould, in the grave.

"And hark ye!" here his voice took on the keening note; outside Jude's shambling steps could be heard and the mad cackle of her laughter—inopportune laughter. Fragoletta rose determinedly and pulled to the inadequate bolt. Then she resumed her seat and waved her right hand at her father. "You asked me," continued the old man, and as he spoke his eyes turned to the closed-in shutters, which hid from his view the road that wound like a ribbon to the extreme right, "you asked me, and I tell you, I warn you by the curse that is upon you and your blood, by the sacred interment of your mother, by the thing that stands forever at our doomed sides, whenever a gypsy caravan—oh, God! oh, God!—a gypsy caravan winds down that fated road, scarlet like blood, reptilian, shun it, shun it! Close your eyes to it, girl, as you live; close your ears to it and your heart, lest the accursed thing call to you, call to the bad blood within you—the curse that has burned your soul. This is my warning—my first one, my last one: 'Ware, 'ware of a gypsy caravan!"

Through the key-hole whistled mad Jude's demoniac laughter—laughter made horrible by fear—the demented creature's fear of the unprecedented.

"Go away, Jude," commanded Fragoletta; "go away, I say. Your mistress speaks to you."

There was a moment of silence without, evidently dully amazed silence. Then the retreating of her footsteps and a voice muttering, "Yass'm, Miss 'Licity; yass'm."

Fragoletta's eyes filled with quick tears. Poor, mad Jude! The reply, the command of her earlier days had sent her poor, unhinged mind hurtling backwards. She replied as she had wont to reply to Felicity Ravenel, Fragoletta's young, laughing mother.

Then Fragoletta rose from her otterman; she stepped around squarely in front of her father. At last he had done the unbearable thing—he, in his mould and his gloom; he, among the bats and the owls—all that was dankest and darkest and saddest. He had denied the brilliant, musical, living thing that had trailed its bright way down on the ribbon road; he had given warning of him whom she knew that she loved.

Something of the repressed frenzy of her years crept into her voice. It vibrated with young scorn, young indignation, young justification of the all but mythological figure who had lit the ardent fire within her.

"If you warn me," she cried out, "I defy you here, under the portrait of my mother! I defy you! I am going to the gypsy caravan! I am going to him who will give what you have kept from me, and"—here she bent over him and just for an instant some of his own fanaticism lit her eyes, darkening them like night-fires—"I am going to tear the bandage from off my cursed hand!"

She stopped, stretching forth her bared white hand toward him—a white hand with a touch of withering to it. It shook in his face, from which the yellow had given way to a ghastly white. Then her own face froze; she gave one last look and fled from the room, wrenched the rusted locks of the old front doorway, disturbed the bats in their blind circles, fled, fled, fled away from the horrid sight. Her father's reason had fled at sight of the cursed hand!

CHAPTER SIX

THE EVIL POWERS

OUT, out, out into the blessed sunshine, the springing, green grass under her feet, that stumbled at first, then, gaining nimbleness, tripped lightly, free as some gazelle's. She parted her flower lips and breathed in the sun-burdened air. She was free—free at last! Free even of the bandage that had cumbered the use of her hand. Gazing down at it, she stopped a moment to inspect it; perhaps it was the long mystery that had surrounded it, perhaps it was some of the taint of the House of Silence that caused a shudder of cold to run through her, that shot her through with a foreboding that here, on this apparently innocent pink tracery of her palm, was to be the inevitable fulfilment of the curse her father had hurled at her, accredited to her. Inevitably, too, she felt it would involve the unfettered youth who had, though mutely, called to her in the sunshine, and equally inevitably she knew that, bitter though the curse be, though it gnaw away the very flesh of her heart with pain, sear her spirit with a vitriol of agony, it were better far than the living grave of the house where the curse abode.

The sun was slipping to rest as her hesitant feet made the ribbon road that the gypsy caravan had trailed. The caravan had disappeared and she wondered for a moment with terror whither it had gone—perhaps to the soft green of the wood to the right of the road again, perhaps there in the cool depths he awaited her, the lad with the scarf of flame about his slender hips. While she stood uncertain, a small boy came over the crest of the road and advanced upon her with sturdy strides. He was a small, bare-footed, freckled boy, with eyes of honest gray. Fragoletta always remembered him as her first introduction to small-boydom. She wondered with a sort of terror as she saw him approaching, confidently and unconcernedly whistling, how one was supposed to address miniature persons of his debonair order. She stopped him timidly.

"Do you know," she began, and in her uncertainty the broken music of her voice became evident again, "do you know where the—the—gypsies have gone?"

The small boy stared at her; she must have made a strange figure to his frank eyes, all unused to strangeness, standing there in her coarse, white cotton skirt, more fit for the cold limbs of a corpse than the flesh-and-blood ones of a lovely girl; her heavy, pale gold hair piled high on her head in quaint imitation of the daguerreotype; the prison pallor of her skin, that seemed to assail one like some evident thing, and then the strangeness of her voice and the futile gestures of her still whiter left hand.

"Gee!" finally burst forth the small urchin. Then, gathering terror filling his distending eyes, he pointed a shaking, stubby finger at her. "Who—where'd you come from?" he got out.

"Over there," answered Fragoletta; "but I——"

But the small boy gave vent to one ungodly, terror-stricken shriek and ran down the road to the town as fast as ever his bare legs would carry him. He precipitated himself onto the maternal lap with the long-drawn, shuddering wail that he had "seen the cursed hand girl; he had—he had—he had——" and followed this bellowed information up with a string of hysterical information to the effect that she "was sorter white and shining and her hair was all high, and she had on somethin' like Mis' Biers wore when she was laid out, and she talked like the harp over at the Lloyd mansion, kinder sweet and cracky-like, and she wanted to know where the gypsies had gone—and did his mother suppose she would come after him again?"

From what his mother could gather from the disconnected, unpunctuated tale, she gave comforting information that she didn't believe Fragoletta Ravenel would come near the town, and then she donned her second-best bib and tucker and sallied forth to regale her neighbors with the somewhat creepy distinction that had befallen her son and heir. Wherefore and thereaf er Conklin became a hero in the village of his birth, and many and miraculous were the tales he told of the daughter of the House of Silence when his ebbing courage permitted of vainglory and persiflage. The village finally came to the conclusion that she was, at the very least, an immortal, with hair in the fashion of the Seventies, a voice like a combination of musical instruments slightly out of tune, and a penchant, no doubt hereditary, for queerness when it came to the gypsies.

It was reported further that Fragoletta encountered one more person on her way to the gypsy camp before her final disappearance, and that that person—a youth of the village—had forthwith vanished off the face of the globe; but as some time later he was found to have eloped with the daughter of the undertaker in the neighboring village, that particular bit of necromancy was removed from Fragoletta's door.

As a matter of fact, Fragoletta met no one after her encounter with the small boy and his unceremonious departure, hair bristling, brown legs flying.

She had decided that even if she did meet any one she had better pass them by. People seemed to act very strangely; she felt a confidence, however, that he of the flaming scarf would be at once comprehensive.

"There must be some one somewhere," argued the poor girl wretchedly, "who will not think of me only as the daughter of the House of Silence. The gypsies will know; they are warm and happy and full of color and life. Just because my father condemned them I know that they will know. Oh, my poor father, my poor father; his dreadful eyes, his dreadful eyes!"

It was night when, afar off, she caught the dull white splotches of the tents and caravans, heard the champing of the horses' hoofs, the faint rise and fall of a banjo, the sound of some one singing. She was very tired, very, very footsore and very hungry; she hoped they would be kind to her and give her food and drink and afterward let her look at the fanciful, slender figure of the gypsy lad who had called her to where she was.

The singing continued and, as she drew near enough to discern the words, she stood a moment and listened:

"The wind and the sky and the sun
And the open trail and free;
A staff and a pack and one
To take to the trail with me.

"Over the hills that lure.
Under the trees that sway;
Laughing and strong and poor,
Out on the wander way."

The voice went on, but Fragoletta did not pause longer to listen. It was him, she knew, she knew, and he was calling her, actually this time. Had he not said with a deep, strong tremulo, "and one to take to the trail with me"? And that was what she had come to do—to be that one, to take the trail with him—the long trail, the far trail, wheresoever it might lead.

The singing had ceased when Fragoletta finally came to the edge of the clearing. Within the largest of the tents was the clinking of dishes and she knew that the gypsies were eating. She wondered, as she had wondered in the alarming instance of the small boy, how she should make herself known to them, how announce that she had come to go indefinitely a-gypsying with them?

All at once it came to her that they, who were wise with the warmth of life, who had no doubt traveled far roads and pursued long trails—they could tell her the story that her pink palm disclosed. Before she went with her love-tale to the lad who had called to her, she would learn what curse was printed there for him perforce to share with her.

As she entered the clearing a slight, supple, cat-like figure darted out of one of the tents. Fragoletta caught the gleam of bright, black hair and the gold gleam of brass earrings beneath them. There was a flutter of vari-colored, rather ragged-looking skirts as the girl tripped agilely across the clearing, bound apparently for the tent wherein the evening meal was in process of being eaten.

Fragoletta quickened her weary feet and reached her before she was half across the clearing.

"Please," she said swiftly.

The girl Julie Joy—for it was Julie Joy—drew back sharply. The white, moon-white face, peering at her out of the gloaming, was like one of her own ill fortunes come true. In her ears she seemed to hear Romano's voice, saying, "The home blood, the safe blood, and it is that blood in me that is calling me, Julie Joy."

With the swift gift of gypsy prescience the girl recognized in this white-faced and thrillingly lovely creature, albeit in disconnected fashion, the home blood, the safe blood. She might be a creature distraught of peril, of adventure and unrest; but she was those who, by rights of their heritage, keep to the cloistered hearth. Why had she come here now? Why had she come to show to Romano the unsullied gold of her hair, the matchless white of her face?

"What is it, or who is it you want?" she asked sullenly.

Fragoletta smiled a bit wistfully.

"My hand," she said; "there is something very queer about it I want to know. I thought perhaps some one of you, who know so much and have been so far, could tell me why my father kept it as he did. I want the very wisest of you to see it for me, only—only not the one with the flaming scarf about his hips."

Julie Joy's expressive face had gone through every variation during this most astonishing request for the simple feat of palmistry—and at such an hour! Julie Joy was no coward, but she felt her blood congeal at the thought that this frail girl was probably some lunatic recently escaped; also, she seemed to belong to "money." Julie Joy could not see the cotton skirt, or she would not have formed that judgment. She only caught the pure tones, the delicate, Southern refinement of the daughter of the patrician Ravenels and sized her up immediately as "money."

"If you want your palm read, lady," she said, endeavoring to repress the scorn she felt, or the fear that kept it company, "I'll see whether Queen Tarantella will see you. If that's what you want you've come to the right place; but"—she bent near to Fragoletta and her eyes gleamed evilly into the trustful violet ones—"if you've come for the other," she hissed, "let me warn you, you had better go now—quick!"

Fragoletta shook her head and smiled.

"I am not going to go back, ever," she made answer. "I have come to stay with you, to do as he said, 'Follow the open trail,' only I want to know first what I must expect."

Julie Joy always wished in after times that she had then and there run her stiletto into the snow-white bosom of the girl Fragoletta; but as it was, she felt that here was a situation even her gypsy cunning could not cope with; also, she was curious; also, she felt convinced that the girl was simply an escaped lunatic, and thirdly, she felt sure that Tarantella could handle her. She knew that Tarantella was on her side in her love for Romano. The aged queen had told her herself that it was her wish to see her wedded to Romano e'er she should breathe her last. "You would be a bonnie queen, Julie Joy," she had said at one time; "you are all Romany, and that is good—good for my boy. It will keep him to the free trail, to the far trail, where only can happiness be found—the trail and a loyal mate. You are the lass for Romano. See you that his eyes do not slight you; you have a witch's eye."

Therefore Julie felt that Tarantella would avert danger

to Romano if she sensed it, as she surely would, in this strangeling.

"Wait here," she commanded, "and when the queen has finished her meal she will see you alone. Will grant you an audience in her tent."

Fragoletta waited patiently; it was her nature to wait. She had waited a long, long while for the right to the open and the sun, and she waited all the more patiently because within the magic of that tent waited he for whose sake she had come to take with him to the road.

A few minutes later Julie Joy appeared; her face was still sullen and her berry-red lips pouted dangerously. Romano had not glanced at her during dinner; on the contrary, he had been exceeding solicitous about Carla's baby, who had some strange malady, known as croup. "You had better take it into a house," he had said; "perhaps, Carla, it would be safer there."

Carla had refuted the suggestion, but it had been enough for Julie Joy, who, even as Romano's mother had said, was all Romany. It meant, this suggestion of his, just one thing—that the home blood, the safe blood, was calling; and just outside the tent stood the white sunflower who would lead him thither.

She came up to Fragoletta and took her rather roughly by the arm.

"The queen will see you," she said, "in her own tent. She does not usually read palms at this late hour and her eyes are very bad; but since you have come so long a way——" There was a pause, broken only by the soft padding of the girl's feet as they walked across the dirt clearing. Just outside the tent Julie Joy stopped and faced Fragoletta again, and again fiercely: "This is a favor I have done for you," she said tensely; "a favor against my own judgment. See that you remember it; see that, if our life-lines cross, you repay it, not by draining my heart of blood, but by a like kindliness. Now go; the queen is within."

Fragoletta approached timidly; when she saw the queen she felt a strange aversion toward going at all. Here was a creature even older than her yellow father, even yellower and more shriveled—a veritable withered ape of a person most fearfully and gaudily clad. From the wrinkled paperiness of her countenance her eyes looked out like slightly blurred glass beads; these eyes were upon Fragoletta, and the girl thought that they seemed to distend as she approached. She felt a strange sense of lack. Why was it that people acted so peculiarly over her mere presence? The small, terrified boy, whom surely she would not have harmed for worlds; the pretty gypsy, Julie, whose venom was unmistakable, and now the Queen Tarantella, whose eyes had something of the impending look her father's had worn when he looked, for example, at her left hand.

As she came up to the ancient queen, she saw that she was shaking as with a palsy and that her lips were forming incoherent things.

"Cross my palm with silver," she heard presently; "cross it with silver to the right, to the left, little lady."

Fragoletta stared at her; here was an incomprehensible jargon. The only silver she knew anything about were the heavy, tarnished flagons and punch-bowls that had adorned the buffets in the House of Silence. Surely, even had she had them with her, they could not have been placed upon that withered, palsied hand. She shook her head.

"I am afraid I don't know what you mean," she said.

Tarantella bent closer; then something like a groan escaped her. "The head of the Ravenels," she muttered; "the proud head of the cursed Ravenels!"

Then, after a silence during which the beating of Fragoletta's heart and the groaning intake of the queen's breath from behind her yellower teeth were the sole duet, the queen bent forward.

"Your right palm, little lady," she said, seeming to keep to the form of speech with difficulty; "your right palm that you yourself have made."

Fragoletta held out her slender, milk-white hand, smooth as a babe's without, moist and almost innocent of line within.

The queen bent over it a long while; she bent closer and closer to it as though in an attempt to read that which was not there. "I see a bit of verse," she said at length, "a vast deal of dreamings. I see tears—the tears of innocence and sadness; I see hope; I see, at the last, a strange outbreak of determination; I see—but that is all I see. All strange—strange; some twenty summers must have crowned your bonnie head, little lady, and there is no more here than the tears and dreams of a sad childhood."

"That is all," said Fragoletta simply. She was dazed with wonder at the passing great wisdom of this withered hag. "Can you tell me?" she began, and lifted the left hand, hanging idly at her side.

The gypsy queen raised the left hand and bent over, beginning her drone.

"I see——"

Of a sudden she pushed the girl violently from her, so that she fell, striking her head against an old trunk. Through the tent, throughout all the encampment a wild, terrible scream arose like some ghoulish banshee:

"It is the cursed hand!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE MEETING

WHEN Fragoletta knew again where she was she found herself in an apparently empty tent, save for the single candle that fluttered on a wooden box in one corner. The bed she was on felt hard and uncomfortable; her head ached violently and little chills of cold ran up and down her body.

For some minutes she couldn't collect her wits; she tried to make out the faded chintz of her little, old dressing-table, the moon coming through her closed shutters in greenish bars. She strained her ears to catch the furry beating of the bats' wings; but all was still, save for the flapping of tents' sides, the neighing of a horse and something like a guttural groan.

Slowly her surroundings became real to her and all that had transpired on this forever unforgetable day.

And simultaneously a great sense of peace—she had said what she had said; that no matter what the pain, how steep the price, she was willing to pay for the sake of the trail with him. He was near; this gave her the comfort; he was near and sooner or later he would come to her. She could lie still and wait.

All night she lay alone, waiting, waiting. Toward dawn the slender, black-eyed girl came in; the venom in her face was more pronounced than ever. From an abstract danger this girl had become an actual menace. Tarantella lay in a burning fever, and beside her was Romano, to whom she held as though it meant his life to let him go. As he moistened the shriveled, tensely drawn lips now and again, she would groan:

"The cursed hand! The cursed hand!"

As Julie entered the tent, Fragoletta made an effort to rise. "Is she better," she asked sweetly, "the poor old lady? That was what I wanted to know; the trouble there seems to be with my left hand. I don't know yet, but it must be something very, very dreadful. Only, I didn't, you see, know that it would affect any one but me. I—I feel sorry."

Julie Joy stood silently regarding her while she talked, and as she watched, the venom on her face grew to a passion of hatred. The cruel, unreasoning hatred one woman feels for another more fair, particularly the antithesis of her own beauty—hatred of those violet eyes, so sweet, so shy, so tender; hatred of that milky skin, that marvel of pale gold hair; hatred of that slender form, frail, rounded, lovable. As though to taunt her, a vision grew before her eyes—a vision of a far trail and Romano and this girl, his arm about her, and at the end a mansion, gleaming samite in the sun, books and little children—all the safe things, the hearth things, the things in which she, Julie Joy, could never have a part.

"You all but killed the mother of our king," said Julie Joy at last; "she lies in a great fever. Even yet she may die, and it will be your fault. How shall you like that, Moon-White? Then you shall be a murderess. How shall you like that?"

"But I cannot help what is written on my hand," protested Fragoletta, tears gathering in her violet eyes; "I did not write it there, you know, and you said that I had come to the right place to have it read. You said that yourself."

Julie Joy took a step nearer her.

"Yes, and I said, too," she hissed, "that if you had come for anything else you had better go away. No good can befall you here, Moon-White. There is no one, there is nothing here for you!"

Fragoletta smiled confidently.

"Oh, yes," she affirmed, "there is, really and truly, there is; and if you don't mind, might I have just a little coffee? I haven't touched food since yesterday and I am very weak."

Julie made no reply, just flashed her black eyes at the pale girl and flounced out of the tent, brass earrings jangling, black curls flying.

Some hours later, during which Fragoletta had fallen into a troubled nap, the tent door opened again and another gypsy girl came in—a girl with just a little of the bloom rubbed off. There were dark circles under her eyes and Fragoletta was to remember them as the first kind eyes she had ever looked into. This girl's hair was black and curly, too, and her lips were red, but they drooped and there was something very tired in her eyes.

She bore a cup of steaming coffee in her hand and as she handed it to Fragoletta she sat down on the hard cot beside her. "How have you come," she asked kindly, "and where did you come from?"

Fragoletta sipped the beverage, and answered simply:

"From the House of Silence, across the road and over the hill. I have lived there—oh, a long, long while. I have lived there all in the dark and the mould and the gloom, and there were bats and things. Yesterday I saw your caravan coming over the hill; I heard the sound of your music, the sound of your laughter; last and best of all, I saw a youth, who wore a crimson scarf. He stood in the very center of the road, with his head flung back; he seemed to be drinking in all the sunshine, drinking it into himself, and at the same time he seemed to be calling to me, 'Come, Fragoletta'; he seemed to be saying; 'Come, let us dance and sing.' It was my call and I have answered it. I am very sorry my coming has brought sorrow; but I had counted on that. I've never known anything but sorrow and gloom and decay of death; but I knew that I must come no matter what the sorrow, no matter what the pain. This is why I am here."

Carla bent over the earnest, lovely face and kissed the white brow. "I think I am glad you have come, little miss," she said, "and still I fear I dare not ask for your palm; I am afraid. We gypsies are superstitious and I dare run no risks. I have two little babies and I could not be laid up with a fever like our Queen Tarantella. I do not believe it to be your fault, though, nor does any one except Julie. You must not mind Julie, Fragoletta; she—— But just remember this, young miss, 'The gypsy heart to the gypsy heart ever the whole world o'er.' Perhaps if you remember that, you will not suffer so; the stars have written it; it is ordained."

After that she went away, telling Fragoletta she should have more food later, when the camp breakfast was ready, and that in the meanwhile she was at liberty, if she cared, to go. After she had left, Fragoletta arose from the cot and crept out of the tent. Over the heavens the baby pink down of the dawn was creeping, edged with a faint, far gold. Fragoletta watched it eagerly. High in the pink a lark was singing. It all seemed far away from this stress and terror and mystery that pursued her everywhere.

The small boy gave vent to a terror-stricken shriek and ran down the road.

She struck into the forest a bit, out of the view of the tents and horses and the men who, in various stages of dishabille, were appearing at tent-doors and going about a leisurely duty.

Fragoletta walked slowly, and there was a smile on her face. To-day surely he would come to her; to-day would see the beginning of her new life; to-day she would be born again out of the mould of the grave.

As she walked she had followed the twistings of a tiny brook. She stopped and watched it, crystal clear and cool. Her feet, all unaccustomed to walking, ached her and were bruised, and she stooped and pulled off the coarsely woven stockings and the faulty shoes mad Jude had purchased on her semi-annual and very dubious trip to the village for supplies, household and otherwise.

She stepped into the water, swishing the pearly pebbles about with her pink toes and giving little exclamations of pure joy at the delicious novelty of it. As she bent to dabble her fingers, too, the gold glory of her hair loosened and tumbled over shoulders and back to her knees—a glittering, marvelous cascade.

It was so that Romano came upon her.

He came through the trees, swiftly, silently, bent on finding the mysterious stranger, who had come so curiously and with such fateful results. Something told him, warned him, and then he saw her—she of whom he had dreamed, she who had had power to turn him from the trail, from the light call of the blood, from the proffered

arms of Julie Joy; she who called to him with a million voices. It was she!

Something seemed to warn him not to approach her too suddenly. He was minded of a white figure of a nun he had seen once in a walk about the country. There seemed to be that cloistral air about her—something too fair, too white, too high for earth. He could not believe that what his mother had seen had been anything but a figment of her failing vision—a nightmare of the mind that her great age must be impairing at last; and if she had seen anything, then surely it was no fault of this white creature's.

Standing still where he was, his head flung back, his blue eyes full upon her, he began in the tenderest tones of his voice:

"The wind and the sky and the sun,
A star-strewn vault at night;
And two hearts beating high,
Athrill with an old delight."

On the first note Fragoletta turned and saw him standing there, crimson scarf about his slender hips; and oh! in the eyes he turned to hers there was naught but a glory of love—such a glory as the dawn had been with its fringing of far gold, such a glory as her glad heart answered.

He came to her swiftly then, and gently bent to her Close her clinging arms circled his throat, close she pressed her slight body to his, feeling for the first time the warmth of a caress.

"My girl," he was muttering tenderly, stroking the pure gold of her hair, kissing her violet eyes, kissing her warm mouth, no longer cold, but glowing like the warm heart of a rose, "my girl, I've been waiting for you. See, this has been written, you pale, gold thing of a hearth and home and happiness, you moon-white, marvelous thing. I have read of you, girl-o'-mine, there in the crowded towns. I have followed the lure of your feet over the longest trails, I have listened to your calling me in every larkling's song, in every singing tree. I have yearned for you by my own camp-fire. I have wanted you, my pearl, my life, you only one among women. The heart of a gypsy is a true heart, girl, once the true mate is found. Kiss me again, kiss me again, my sweet, my own, my girl."

After a long while Fragoletta sat by the side of Romano and told him the tale of her early years. Holding his dear hand fast, she spoke of the loveless years; she told of her father; of mad Jude, grown mad in the service of the cursed Ravenels; she told him of her mother, who was not cursed, but laughing and sweet and sane, her mother who had seemed to say to her, "Go forth, my child, from this!" She told of the ladies who had come, she thought, to rescue her; she told of her early apathy to it all and her late awakening, reaching its zenith on the yesterday when he had stood on the ribbon road and seemed to call to her. She went into the scene with her father, the laughter of mad Jude. her great defiance of her father, even to the tearing off of the veritable cerement that bound her apparently innocuous but doubtlessly fatal hand; and the horrible, hideous result—the leaving of all reason from her father's poor, doomed eyes; the frightful, mad insanity with which he had watched her flight from the doomed house, and out and away.

She told of the small boy and his terror and the venom of Julie Joy; she told, too, of the kindness of Carla and the coffee, which was all she had.

Romano listened, holding her very close where her broken, musical voice quivered over some detail that hurt her most cruelly, that had been most bitter to bear. When she spoke of Julie Joy his frown deepened; he knew too well the fire of Julie Joy and just what it might mean when the fuel thereof was hatred instead of love.

Before he answered her, however, save by a kiss on her quivering mouth, he went back to the camp. When he returned he had an extra jug of coffee, some rolls, some honey and some strips of bacon. Placing these on a large, clean paper on the ground, he proceeded to build a fire with some small sticks and twigs lying about. When the fire was crackling he unearthed a tiny frying-pan and proceeded to fry the bacon, flashing his white teeth delightedly at Fragoletta, who watched him gravely, but happily content.

After he had gathered her some berries and watched her eat them he served her a piping breakfast of coffee and bacon and rolls and honey. The poor child was famished, and there in the sweet, cool wood, with Romano stretched beside her, some of the wan, starved youth of her was filled.

As she ate, Romano talked in his turn; told her of his nomadic life, the life of his people; told how always he had never been quite content, but had not known why; of his long readings in the town—deep readings, had either of them realized it—of his final questioning of his grandmother and the knowledge that the later Romanys had often intermarried and that, no doubt, the outside blood was stronger, or at least as strong in him, than that of the tribe.

Then, in a softer, lower tone, he told of his vision of her—the vision that had stayed with him persistently, blotting out the images of the world, making it possible for him to love her, or else to follow forever the lone trail.

It was nearly high noon when the lovers arose from the ground and began to make their way back to the camp.

"My mother is better for her fright now," said Romano, "and she must be told of our coming marriage. It must be soon, my Fragoletta, since you cannot, of course, go back, and it were better to be my wife so that I can protect you while you are in the tribe."

In his mind's eye Romano, jealous after the fashion of his people, saw the other fellows looking at her covetously—this fair, white, wonderful girl. He saw Frollo's great eyes searching her; Gay Tonio making pseudo love to her—and she was so young, so grave, so untutored.

When they reached the encampment everything seemed quiet. Frollo met them and said that the queen was better and was dressed and sitting up in bed. He passed on, and they saw only Carla, feeding her youngest on the step of her caravan. Julie Joy was nowhere to be seen.

Romano put his arm about her as they entered the queen's tent. The girl was quivering violently.

Tarantella raised herself as her grandson entered, and her eyes dilated again as they rested on this fairest daughter of the Ravenels.

"Mother," her son began, "Fragoletta is going to be my wife. I love her and she loves me; she——"

His assertion was cut short by a shriek from Tarantella. She had risen to a sitting posture now and one bony hand pointed at her son.

"She loves you!" she screamed. "She loves you! Oh, accursed daughter of a thrice accursed house, look upon your left hand, which is the hand of your fate! The cursed hand. The cursed hand!"

Fragoletta looked and her eyes sickened with terror. Her hand was streaked across with a band of thickish blood!

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE PLAN OF JULIE JOY

WHILE these things were taking place in the tent of the queen of the Romanys, Julie Joy was planning on the outside. She laid her plans with the cunning of her blood, made many times manifold by her almost insane passion for Romano.

Ever since she could remember she had loved Romano. He was some five years older than she. Julie Joy was very young in years, but kissed to wisdom and maturity by the sun, the exigencies of the trail and the fire of her heart lit by the careless hands of her king. As a toddler she had looked up to the blue-eyed lad, who had taught her all that she had known of bird-lore and wood-lore, the stories in the running brooks, the castles in the clouds. From a somewhat sullen, unimaginative child he had, by

the play of his own mind, kindled the rainbow sparks of imagination in her—rather to his own undoing, since Julie, the something of a clod, and Julie, the fiery, wide-awake, were two very different beings. Later on, as a half-grown girl to his picturesque youth, she had adored him. He had been the sole summit to which she aspired, the one rock on which she built her faith, the ultimate hope of her vagrant life, the treasure at the end of the trail. It woke her to madness to have this milk-white maid come in and take him from her—him whom she had loved so long, so faithfully.

And she had been faithful, not always easily. Most of the men of the tribe had tried for the exotic Julie Joy before they accepted their second-bests and settled into more or less placidity. Only one had remained obdurate in the face of the most blatant rebuff; that one was the carefree Tonio. What love lit his heart for Julie Joy only himself knew and the pulsing stars, perhaps smiling down on him with the high derision of their knowing.

It was to Tonio then that she went for help in her plan. It was not an easy plan for Tony to take to zestfully, being a quite unashamed scheme for the removal of the girl Fragoletta.

"If she stays I die," she told him dramatically, "and you know full well that the word of Julie Joy is no light thing. See, it is written on my hand that I have love or death. I shall not give up love without a fight, in which you must help me, Tonio, if you want me to live; or else"—she stretched wide her arms with something of sublimity in their suggestion of utter abandon—"there are high cliffs and the long, long leap and the poor, shattered body of pretty Julie Joy. Not a pleasant picture, eh, Tonio?"

The youth shivered.

"Don't, Julie Joy!" he muttered, and passed a shaking arm across his troubled eyes.

Julie laughed softly.

"Or yet again," she persisted ruthlessly, "there is my dagger. See how it shines and gleams! How it would bite into, how it would lick the breast of Julie Joy!"

Tonio grasped her roughly by the arm.

"Stop it, Julie!" he command roughly. "I'll do what you want—help you in your devil's plan, whatever it is, and you know it. You needn't—needn't try to hurt me any more than you do."

Pain vibrated in the lad's voice, and Julie looked at him. Suddenly her hard, bright eyes softened; she seemed to sense in him something of the pain that was torturing herself. She laid a kindly hand over his.

"I'm sorry, Tonio," she whispered, "honest and true, I am; but I can't help it. I wish I could love you and be happy with you; I do; but the love of Romano—eh, Tonio?—it was here"—extending her left hand sadly—"here before I was born."

"Well, what is it you want me to do for you, Julie? You must get this idea of death and all that right out of your head. You may not live with me; but, sacre! you're not going to die and leave me, that I swear. Or else——"

"Or else what, Tonio?"

"Or else I may follow you, Julie Joy, and have you in death when I couldn't in life."

The two young things sat silent a moment. From afar off came the call of a nightingale; high above them rode a slender moon; near by Carla's sick baby could be heard fretfully wailing. Julie put her mouth to Tonio's ear.

"I am going to the House of the Cursed Hand," she whispered; "her father is there, and a negro lunatic, I think. I am going to her father and tell him that unless he comes after his daughter by the morrow and takes her where she will never be found again by one of the Romany blood, I will—she will be found at his paddock gate with a bloody wound in her breast."

Tonio started. "They say strange things about that house," he whispered back; "leeches who fasten upon your throat and suck the blood away; huge bats who flap their furry wings across your face; mould that clings to you and turns you into a livid corpse. I have heard these tales about the country-side, Julie, and we know that the girl is cursed. I can hear yet the scream of Tarantella. Our queen is not easily distraught, as you know, Julie. Never since I have been born have I seen her so much as turn a hair when she has seen on the palms of great people fates as cruel as hell; but on the palm of this girl and the sinister blood—ugh!"

"I am not afraid of bats nor leeches nor anything at all," said Julie coldly, rising with a swift, pantherine motion, and looking down on the staring Tonio with derisive eyes, "and you may stay in the safety of the clearing." She bent over him and her lips bared her teeth cruelly. "I am only afraid of one thing," she said, "and that is the love trail without Romano by my side."

Tonio arose from the ground and stood by her.

"Of course I go, you child of madness," he said. "When shall it be?"

"Now," whispered back Julie; "it has all worked out. Carella, who shares my tent with me, has gone in to sleep with the Queen Mother to-night; Carla, who is the only one who could come in to talk with me, has the sick baby, and will be in attendance, too, on Tarantella; and you, fortunate one, share a tent alone. No one will miss us, and if they should, we will say the trail lured us and we took to it a while; no one will ever suspect us of that."

"Romano?" queried Tonio a bit tentatively. "I think he has an eye on you, Julie."

"He is too busy with the white girl to-night," answered Julie Joy bitterly. "Carla says she is sick nigh to death with fear and all. Why hasn't she the courage to die? Why does she come to curse Romano? These milky ones, they have the courage of a rabbit."

As she spoke, Julie was guiding Tonio to the edge of the encampment.

"We will cut across the ribbon road to the right of the cursed house," she said, "and then across the meadows, the weed, through the creeping lizards, and up to the front door. We will gain entrance through the sash in the blinds and smash the rotting bolts."

The two made the encampment clearing and sped, like fleet errands, on their dread mission into the night.

Up in a tree an owl hooted, "Tu whit tu whco, tu whit tu whoo-o!"

Back of the tent, where they had had their confab, somebody stumbled on a twig and fled in the other direction.

CHAPTER NINE

TWO WOMEN

IT was well past midnight when Fragoletta, peering with furtive, terrified eyes into the still darkness, saw the flap of her tent open and some one glide in noiselessly. She made a supreme effort and managed to articulate:

"Who is it?"

"It's only me—Carla," whispered back an answering voice. "My baby is asleep and the fever dies, and I have something to say to you. It is an important thing, and I am telling you the truth. You must believe that, if you—if you want to live.

"I don't know why I turn from my own people to warn you—you, an outsider, who are bringing woe and sorrow and sickness to our tribe; you, who are breaking the fiery heart of Julie Joy, who lives and had her being in the hope of the love of King Romano."

Fragoletta started and her face grew even paler.

"But," continued Carla, still in her cautious whisper, "there is something in me that makes me. I had a strange dream one night—last Hallowe'en it was, too. I dreamed I held a changeling in my arms, and by the blood of my tribe, the joy I felt was keener than my own berry-brown babes have ever given me. I dreamed the changeling looked at me with violet eyes, sad eyes, eyes that begged of me; and I dreamed I kept crying to it, 'What is it you want me to do? What is it you want

me to do?' till at last my man awoke me, shaking me and cursing me for a fool that I break his slumber and that of the babies. And for weeks he was jealous and threatened to kill me for calling out upon some man in the still of night. They are fools, these men, Fragoletta. They believe, the lot of them, that a woman makes no moan save it be for the sake of them.

"Well, for that and for other reasons I have never forgotten the dream of the changeling, and when you came in upon us the other night, girl, I saw the violet eyes and knew why I had dreamed that dream. It meant that I was to give you aid, to guard you when you came among us. See, it is written!"

"Is it written on your palm, Carla?" asked Fragoletta, her voice still tremulous from the horror of the scenes she had undergone, herself the wretched center of them all.

Carla looked at her half-scornfully. "The destinies of all men are written on their palms," she intoned rather than spoke, "that which was, and is, and is to be. No one can escape; we carry our fate with us written in indelible ink—the ink of our flesh and blood."

Fragoletta was silent a moment; it felt good to have Carla sit by her. Hers was a kindly presence, the first she had ever known save Romano's, and his could scarcely be called kindly. Jude had been kind in her fearful way, but Carla was a woman—a young woman like herself—and she spoke to her with a voice that held softness and laid a warm, strong hand upon her shoulder.

All at once Fragoletta found herself sobbing hoarse, pitiful sobs—sobs compounded of the long lonely, terrified child and the equally terrified woman. She found herself telling Carla of her stricken life in the House of the Cursed Hand—her yellow father, her mad slave, all of the gloom and the solitude; her awakening and her flight.

"I envied you all so," she said; "you seemed so alive, so much in the sunshine and starshine, and he—he seemed to typify it all. He called me and called me, and I came."

Carla patted her and comforted her and asked her whether she had any idea as to the fearful curse that seemed to follow her even into the gypsy clearing.

"No," said Fragoletta thoughtfully, "I haven't an idea. You see, I never talked to a soul in all my life save my father and Jude. My father wouldn't talk, and as Jude, poor thing, is a lunatic, what she said didn't cast much light on the subject. I didn't even know things were wrong until it sort of came to me quite lately. I think looking so much at my mother's picture made me know. She was so smiley and happy-looking and pretty. I got to thinking that if my own mother looked like that, things must have been different some time; and my father's picture, too, it is all"—here she shivered in reminiscence—"all covered with that terrible green mould; but from what I could see he was young and smiley, too, and I got to wondering why just me should be different; and then, and then your tribe came over the ribbon road, there in the sun. Oh, you looked so gay, so full of color, just so different from me—me in my living tomb. I knew that I couldn't stand it any more."

Here the poor child gave way to the stifled sobs again and Carla awkwardly patted her shoulder, wondering how she could break to the distraught girl the further misfortune that attended her—the knowledge that the gypsy camp was not the warm and glowing refuge she had fondly imagined, but the means to a tomb, in all reality.

And in the meantime time pressed. Julie Joy was very light and fleet of foot and very swift of action. She would execute her plan in the most expeditious manner. Carla knew Julie of old.

Suddenly the girl Fragoletta spoke again.

"There's only one thing I am quite sure of," she said, "and that is that this curse business and all of it has something to do with you gypsies, because every time a caravan has come over the crest of the hill I have had a most awful time. My father has moaned and groaned and wailed till my blood froze in me, and old Jude has bolted and barred the shutters and we have lived like the dead, barely with enough food to exist on. This would keep up till the gypsies went away. This time"—her voice took on the obstinate note of a determined child—"this time I am going with you."

Carla straightened and took her patting hand away.

"Hearken, Fragoletta," she said, "and be a brave child. To-night I felt that there was mischief brewing. I felt it in the air. It charged the air when Julie Joy was about. I saw her look at you once or twice, and the look told me. Fragoletta, Julie Joy is mad—mad with the love of Romano. She has always been; ever since she was a babe at her mother's breast her eyes would rove to follow the King Romano. She loves him now as only a gypsy can, with the wild blood that is in her. She would not hesitate to kill for him; no crime would be too red; if she walked to him on a path of bleeding hearts or over burning ploughshares or with her bare feet on spikes and swords, still she would walk so she got to him at last.

"I tell you, girl, I would not be doing this for you, dream or no dream, if I thought Julie Joy could win the love of Romano. The queen wishes it, and well; Julie is of mine own people, Fragoletta, and it would be the thing for me, who am all Romany, to do. But Romano has talked to me more than to any one of the tribe. I am"—Carla smiled a bit—"the only one, I guess, who has not been in love with him. I've always held my own man best, though Romano is dear and sweet, I know; but he has told me the dreams that have followed him all the long trail and that will always follow him. There is no more love in him for the swarthy Julie Joy than there is for the scarlet tanager that wings its vivid way through the tree-tops. He follows always a moon-white dream, for he has told me so; and he knew, and I knew that he knew, that you are the moon-white dream. Romano is my king, therefore my first allegiance goes to him. So hear me, Fragoletta.

"This evening at moonrise, when all had quieted down save the fretting of my own babe, I left it whining there and crept out into the clearing to see what mischief Julie Joy was brewing. I crept stealthily, trying to locate her, and at last I heard the tense murmur of her whispering. I stole behind the tent, where she sat crouched with Tonio by her side. Now, Tonio loves Julie even as Julie loves Romano, and I knew that the two would make a dangerous combination. I listened shamelessly. Girl, they are going, have gone to the House of the Cursed Hand. They——"

But Fragoletta rose to a rigid sitting posture on the cot; she grabbed Carla's arm in her feverish hand, her voice was incautiously shrill.

"No, no, no!" she cried. "Not that; oh, not that! Oh, Carla; oh, Romano; oh, my God! Don't let her get my yellow father and mad Jude after me. Don't let them take me back to the furry bats and the things that creep and crawl and the mould and the dust. Oh, mother, mother, why was I ever born? Why was I ever, ever born?"

Carla, frightened into silence at first by the girl's unexpected and violent outburst, now leaned forward and clamped her hand over her mouth.

"Be still, will ye!" she commanded roughly, "else you will lose your life and Romano and everything."

Romano's name quieted her, and she lay back, breast heaving as though about to be rent asunder by the violence of this newest, greatest terror. Poor child! she little recked how vast the terrors were to which her faltering feet were leading her.

"Tell me then, Carla," she said at last passively.

Carla spoke rapidly and more quietly than before.

"You must take the trail to the Cave of the Bats that leads straight back from the clearing," she said. "It is a hard trail, but the trail that Julie Joy will blaze for ye will be still harder. Moreover, it is a trail that has many a twist and turn, and the Cave of the Bats is known to no one save my man and me. He—he got into trouble hereabouts one time and had to hide himself and

some loot in the cave. That's how I come to know of it. It has a horrid, bad name, and no one would ever dream of a girl like you taking to it, even if they knew of it, which they don't. Then, so soon as you have gone a bit, I will tell Romano and he will follow you."

"Why can't Romano start with me?" begged Fragoletta. "I might get lost and he might miss me, and oh! I am afraid I——"

Carla broke in upon her roughly.

"Ye've no time to do aught but what I say," she said. "I know Romano, but he does not know his people. He's too much of the outer blood in his veins. He is little enough of a gypsy save when it comes to lyin' in the sun like a lizard or singin' the hearts from the gypsy maids as they follow along the trail. He will not be made to believe that Julie Joy means danger until too late. He will try to watch you here rather than leave his grandmother and follow an unblazed trail. But when could any man defeat a woman who loved him? Julie Joy would have ye a corpse at his feet ere ever she knew he meant it. Once you have gone, however, that will be a different story. You are his girl; he will follow you even to the Cave of the Bats and beyond. He will leave his people, the trail, turn on his blood for his woman. He is a man; he will take to the chase. Never fear, Fragoletta, Romano will be with you ere the sun rises on the morrow. Now, make haste; there is no time to lose."

Fragoletta arose and pinned up her hair with hands that shook as though palsied. Carla took off her bright scarf and twined it about her head.

"There will be many bats," she said, "and boughs that claw like living fingers." She also unloosed her gaily-striped shawl and wound it about the girl's slender shoulders. "Now, if they see you before ye have gone very far," she said, "they will think it is just Carla gone for berries or medicine bark for the baby. Speed ye, speed ye."

Fragoletta went to the door of the tent, then she turned and sought Carla's eyes. So many lies, so much intrigue and murder and horror and death. Suppose Carla, too, was conspiring to do her harm? Suppose she, too, like the terrible Julie Joy, held love for Romano, even though she had denied it?

But the eyes of Carla met hers steadily, kindly. There was no evil there and Fragoletta, smiling, turned and fled into the night.

CHAPTER TEN

IN THE HOUSE OF THE CURSED HAND

THE fleet figures of Julie Joy and Tonio had stopped and they were crouching now by the paddock gate in the back of the old plantation grounds. There were here and there what looked in the night like huge, decrepit mushrooms or toadstools. These, seen by the light of day, were the tumbled remains of the little log cabins that had once housed the rollicking negroes when peace and plenty shone upon the house of the Ravenels. In one of them, most tumbled and most decrepit of all, mad Jude had grown to ebony girlhood before she had gone up to the plantation-house itself to be personal maid to the smiling bride of "young marse."

In the House of Silence itself no light was visible. Around it the crows talked throatily in the eaves. Now and then an owl called its mate; through the rank grasses all about them a lizard moved with undue haste, or a toad leaped angrily.

The two young things planned in low, unnecessary whispers which would be the best manner of egress into the fearsome abode.

"If we ever get out again," whispered Tonio, who was, as has been said, not very deeply in sympathy with the removal of Fragoletta, since she was not a stumbling-block, but the reverse, to him.

Julie flashed him a disdainful glance and straightway arose and crept up through the dimly seen ruins of the old cabins.

Tonio's reluctance had the strange effect of spurring her to even greater efforts.

They reached finally the back of the white colonial house and decided to accost it from its front.

As they passed around the right side of the place, whose closely shuttered, creaking casements faced the encampment they had left, even Julie shuddered. A voice like nothing they had ever heard before was moaning as in the most frightful agony.

Julie shivered and drew her gay shawl closer. Tonio grunted as though he meant to say, "I told you so; but go on, if you must."

The growth about the steps and the massive pillars that flanked them was so dense that the girl and boy had to fight them to make the steps.

In another minute they were raising the mouldy knocker and dropping it with a horrid clangor. There was something soft about the undeniable noise that it made. They repeated this seven times; on the seventh stroke shuffling footsteps could be heard coming down what seemed to be an interminable passageway. Up-stairs a maniacal laughter broke out and continued.

"The lunatic," muttered Tonio.

"You're one!" hissed Julie Joy, and was about to raise the knocker for the eighth time when the shuffling footsteps ceased and a voice quavered out:

"Is it Fragoletta?"

"We bring news of her," answered Julie Joy in a strong voice; "you must hear it if you would see her alive."

"Who are you that bring the news?" came back the voice.

"I am the gypsy, Julie Joy," answered the girl, "and I have with me Tonio, my friend, to save me from the bats and leeches and the mad woman up above."

There was an interminable silence, during which nothing could be heard but the rise and fall of the witless mirth above. Then, as though the door to a tomb centuries undisturbed swung open, the front door creaked backward and there stood in the pale light of the moon the old colonel, last of the Ravenels.

His yellow face had furrowed till the wrinkles seemed deep caverns of despair; his eyes shone out like the fires of a funeral pyre; his hands shook like leaves before a wind—sere leaves of November.

"I open my doors at last," he said, "to one of the Romany blood. When a curse is upon me it is useless to combat it. I have fought this one with my blood's blood, my soul has died in wrestling with the ghastly thing; but come in, come in. You have tracked me to my door, you who will not be gainsaid. If it is my life you want, it is the last and least thing that I have to give. If you come for that that my child may live, it is yours. Withered, and worthless now, I shall not even struggle."

As he talked he led the way down the long passageway he had so painfully traversed to meet them and ushered them into the small room at the extreme end, where, as a young man and the pride of the Southland, he had been wont to sit and pen fervid epistles to she, whom her daughter had designated as "smiley." He sat there now, love long since a withered flower in a grave—sat there and brooded on the curse that had eaten into his house, into his life like a cancer; brooded on his fair daughter, whom he had not been able to save for all his efforts; brooded with a strange longing on the grave beneath the yew-tree, where lay the gay partner of his youth; out of it all these many weary years. It had come to him lately, even as it had come to Fragoletta, looking at her smiley face, that she would not have permitted the life that they had led; that her cool, Northern spirit would have laughed the curse straight in its menacing, yellow fangs; that she would have wafted them away to her own uplands, where the winds of reason blew sharp and clean. But it was too late now. She had gone and left them here a superstitious, old-blooded, wicked Southerner

and a helpless babe, whom he had imprisoned in a too early tomb; too late, too late—the saddest, saddest dirge that ever lip has sung or pen immortalized.

When they reached the den, Julie Joy's gay scarf and jangling earrings striking odd, incongruous notes in the mould of the old hall, he dropped into the one large chair; then he glanced up from under his heavy brows and motioned Julie to go on.

She bent over him, her vibrant, unafraid young face on a level with his eyes.

"You're a pretty old corpse," she said, "to be telling a tale like this to me; but I've heard hereabouts that you were once called quite a gallant with the ladies. Perhaps you remember even now one who meant the whole difference to you between living and dying."

The gypsy watched him narrowly and was rewarded by seeing the grizzled eyebrows quiver over the sunken eyes. Evidently then the old man had still enough of this earth in him to recall the love he had loved; so much the better for the tale of Julie Joy.

"Well," she went on slowly and impressively, her black eyes never leaving his face, "I love like that, too, and more because the Romany blood is red in my veins and we Romanys love with a love that no other people know. With us it is that love or——" She shivered a little and Tonio stepped nearer and laid his loyal hand on hers, pressed down till the knuckles whitened on the colonel's dust-laden secretary. "Your girl," she went on, "is standing between me and my love. Lots of other things stand between, too, but she is the chief thing. She is with us now, there in the encampment. She will be there if you come after her and force Tarantella to deliver her to you, else you will raise a hue and cry of kidnaping. If there's one thing my tribe wants to steer away from it's that charge. It's not"—Julie was not without her humor—"one of our virtues. If you leave her, well, you'll get her back, all right, all right, Colonel Ravenel; but it'll be in a way you won't like. There'll be a murder at your door."

At these words the terrible old man rose to his unsteady feet and gave a great cry.

"A Romany," he wailed, "a Romany accuses me of a murder? Oh, Lord, Thy hand is heavy upon me! Too long have I suffered from the follies of my youth. Release, release, release; my tenderest spot, my tenderest spot."

Tonio shrank back in horror of the old man—mouth working hideously, foam showing at the corners, talon hands working and unworking.

Julie had her hope of Romano, for whom all things were endurable, to sustain her.

She laid a firm hand on the colonel's.

"Sacre!" she cried out sharply; "but it must have been written in thy palm that you were to be a fool. You need not act like this, old man. Too long have you scattered the wits of the moon-white girl by this craziness. You are no more crazy than I am, and I am only love crazy. Come, come, or I'll cut you short with the sharp blade that I carry, and your daughter after you."

So long had the old colonel had only Fragoletta's terrors and mad Jude's frantic laughter as witnesses to what he was pleased to consider his "fits brought on by the curse" that the sharpness and unconcernedness of Julie's command was not without its effect.

He stopped and looked at her blankly.

"What did you say?" he got out.

"I said to stop making believe you are a fool and come get your daughter, who is with us, before we bring her back to you; and hark ye: when you get her, see that she is never seen again by one of the Romany blood. She is not to come trailing back again as soon as you have her here, and so by the same token you had better not begin having fits again, and you had better stop that old owl up-stairs from her hooting, because the girl will never stay in such a loony-house, and if I did not hate every drop of blood in her blue veins I'd say I didn't blame her."

Even in his most debonair days the aristocratic Colonel Ravenel would have been at a loss as to how to reply to such insolence. Then, no doubt, he would have summoned a liveried butler and had her forcibly assisted from the temporarily inhospitable mansion. Now he merely stared at her with as great a semblance of amazement as his death-mask of a face could contrive. Then, as suddenly with a scream that rent the very ceilings of the place and brought mad Jude's madder laughter to an abrupt cessation, he tore crazily down the hall, flung wide the front doors and rushed into the waning night, shrieking stridently:

"My daughter with the gypsy Tarantella! My daughter with the gypsy Tarantella! The sins of the fathers! Oh, my poor lamb! The sins of the fathers!"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE CHASE

FRAGOLETTA found the trail shown her by the kindly Carla and kept to it carefully. Unlike the gypsies she had no instinct to go by, and only her determination to keep to it till Romano should come to bear her courage high. When he should come nothing, it seemed, would matter; then, if the trail proved too much for them and death claimed them—well, Fragoletta felt that she could think of worse.

Her past day or so in the gypsy camp within sound of Romano's voice, touch of his hand, glance of his eyes—that immemorial morning of love-making by the brook—all these things had brought to the girl the sure knowledge that the calling of Romano to her on that day the caravan came over the crest of the hill was no figment of a sick imagining, but her mate calling her and her certain answer. Therefore, with his coming, what else mattered?

It was nearly dawn, just as Colonel Ravenel, shrieking and screaming, burst for the first time in a quarter of a century from his ancestral portal, that she heard a low voice calling softly:

"Follow the Romany patéran
West to the setting sun."

And she knew that it was Romano singing one of his favorite songs, so that she would know and would not be frightened. She paused for a moment in her climbing over a boulder and crouched against it, waiting. Presently she espied him coming along cat-fashion, on all fours. As soon as he was near enough he dropped to his knees and encircled the also crouching figure with his arms.

"Tired, my girl," he said tenderly, "and frightened? My darling, hark ye! Fragoletta, maid-o'-mine, after all this is over and all has come out right—and it will, it must—then you and I are going far away, where the warm sun will shine on us and take your fears away. We are going to live and love, my Fragoletta, as man and woman have not lived and loved since Burning Sappho; but for the present we have our lives to save. The trail is long, but we will make it and leave the lot of them forevermore behind us."

Fragoletta pressed her lips to those of her lover and, as though that sealed the pact between them, they crouched lower still and Romano, leading the way, kept to the tortuous path all but obscured by brier and strong growth, the impediments of boulders and huge trees that storms had uprooted and flung bodily across the trail.

When the sun broke they were nearly half-way to the ridge that lay like a blade of knife across the top of the mountain—one of the famed Blue Ridges. On the other side of the ridge, a brief fall down, was the Cave of the Bats, almost unknown, wholly unthought of as a refuge for even the most desperate criminals, so horrible were the huge, blind, furred creatures that inhabited it along with a goodly company of equally blind owls, and, it was said, rats half as large as the most pampered of Angoras.

In the now distant days of slavery some poor wretches had sought refuge there from overtyrannical masters, but had been said to return to the lash rather than remain in the noisome cave. An occasional moonshiner of the most desperate variety had been found there now and again by the revenue officers, but generally in such a state from their own distillation that the bats were one with the atmosphere to them. On finding themselves snugly behind bars they had been known to exclaim that it was heaven enough for them, and to declare that, moonshiner or no, they had never been under the influence till the "durned furred things had druv 'em to it."

Once a murderer had hidden there and had wandered forth from it on the day after his refuge, confessing even the littlest details of his crime; but that is another story.

Such was the place of refuge to which Fragoletta and Romano were heading. All these other things had taken place many years before, and there was not a soul in the county who would be apt to trace the fugitives to the old, forgotten spot. With the coming of the day Romano prepared a sort of a screenwork of brier, thorn and grass as a blanket to lay over them. Then they moved to one side of the path and prepared to draw it noiselessly over them should there be any sight of the pursuing party. They had one advantage in that from their vantage of height they could look down into the encampment and pretty well discern any sign of unusual life going on. The danger lay in after the party were clear of the encampment; there might well be other trails for them to take, or, with the astuteness of Julie Joy, might take this trail, double on their tracks and come upon them entirely unforeseen.

One bony hand pointed at her son. "She loves you!" she screamed.

"Of course," whispered Romano, "they will have Tonio and Frollo and a couple of the others with them. They will be armed, too; they will know that it would be impossible for them to take their king unless he be well outnumbered, and if they do take me and you—eh, but they shall pay dearly, Fragoletta."

The girl clutched his arm with a sudden, spasmodic fear.

"Hush," she whispered tensely, "footsteps! Hide, my lover, hide!"

Romano's swift hand went for the cunningly woven screen, and quicker than thought he and Fragoletta lay prone beneath it, giving no more motion by their breathing than the busy insect life beneath the grasses would have naturally given.

Up to the trail came the shuffle and slipping and starting forth again of footsteps. Then a man's voice—Tonio's voice—saying impatiently:

"They wouldn't come this way, Frollo, you should know that. Where could it lead them to? The top of the ridge, where they run the risk of being seen and then the drop to nowhere? They dare not do it by night. One misstep would hurl them to certain death down the fall on the other side of the ridge."

Then Julie's hard, defiant, hopelessly hopeful voice in answer: "I know Romano. He is not afraid of missteps."

Then sepulchrally the aged colonel's voice quavering forth:

"My poor lamb! My poor lamb! The sins of the fathers are upon her!"

At this Fragoletta shuddered strongly and Romano slid his arm along the ground like a snake to reach her cold hand and caress it.

There was a moment of silence on both sides, then Julie's voice again:

"Sacre! the old fool has fainted. This means delay for us. Why did he make us bring him along with his mysterious assertions that we couldn't get the girl without him? If he hadn't seen Tarantella he might have stayed; and Carla, she said he would help us along. Fine help, this! Well, go berrying, my Tonio; I see where we spend the night here. It is not far off now."

Five hours later Romano stretched his almost unbearably cramped limbs, laid his lips to the earth and muttered to Fragoletta:

"My life; we must make the great chance now. I think they all sleep save, perhaps, the ever-wakeful Julie. Her we must try to dodge. Lying still here so long, I have thought of a plan whereby we may fool even her, and if we fool her they are all fooled; but first me must get free from cover and take to the trail. Pull yourself out of the screening immediately and follow me."

Fragoletta obeyed and they cautiously got themselves free of their concealing blanket. Not daring to stretch themselves to their heights nor even to attempt kneeling postures, the two bellied along the ground like serpents, tearing the flesh off their arms and faces, rending their clothing and catching their hair in the angry briers.

As the night grew denser and Romano, something of an astrologer, perceived that there would be no moon that night, he turned back and said in a low-pitched voice to Fragoletta:

"Straighten up, my heart, and we will make a great rush for the ridge. Once there, I have a stout piece of rope with which I shall bind your waist and mine and lasso the other end around the stump of an equally stout tree. As we reach the summit I will give a terrible shriek as though I found that I had made some fearful mistake. I'll shriek, 'Sacre! we die—die!' or something like that, and we will, to all intents and purposes, go over the ledge to the bottom of the cliff, the depth of which no

man's eye has ever probed or tape-measured. Julie will be foiled, or at least taken aback, and when she and the party reach the summit we shall be in the Cave of the Bats, which is, like its occupants, a blind excavation in the cliff side—almost without entrance."

Fragoletta nodded and the two arose to prepare for the great stampede when, with a frightful shriek, Fragoletta collapsed again and began to claw the ground in a frenzy. Romano, with an oath, looked up.

There, in the middle of the trail, confronting them, an apparition horrible, stood the colonel!

CHAPTER TWELVE

JULIE JOY ENDS THE CHASE

THE old man shook a menacing fist at them and his voice whined forth in its habitual, supernatural way.

"We heard you, we saw you! The gypsy girl has a cat's eye; she sent me here to hold you while they prepare—giving away secrets I am. But they are—they are—— Oh, my lamb!"

Hearing that, Romano seized Fragoletta by her trembling hand.

"Come," he whispered.

They brushed by the old man as though he had been a veritable scarecrow in their path, and tore with shortening breath up the trail that aspired, steeper with each ell, to the knife-like ridge and the great coup with which they had planned to end, or begin, their all.

As they ran they heard the hoarse voice of Julie Joy exhorting them to fresher and fresher effort and speed. They knew that she, too, was racing for the love she held dearer than life, and that therefore they had nothing over her there.

As they made the last up-hill rush, Frollo came close behind Fragoletta. She could feel his hand grasping for the torn edges of her fluttering skirt. She felt, with the nightmare horror that comes when one dreams one is being pursued by some fearful Nemesis, that he would at any instant drag her ruthlessly down, down, to some black pit, where the sun of Romano's countenance would never shine.

She gave a whining shriek of sheer despair; her breath cut and scraped her windpipe. Closer, closer, closer Julie Joy's wild laughter echoed in the tree-tops. She was pursuing Romano; she would get him.

"The gypsy blood to the gypsy blood!" Fragoletta screamed again.

And all at once, with a last desperate effort, she stretched herself for a supreme climb and stood upon the ridge, looking down with a sudden, unspeakable horror over an absolute drop of gruesome rock, the bottom of which could not even be imagined. Here—was it here that the rope about their waists was to drop them?

She did not know whether she made any sound or not. She only knew that something that sounded like a horrid facsimile of her father's keening, compounded with mad Jude's mirth, gasped out: "Oh, God! Not this, not this, not this!" and that simultaneously Romano's rope lassoed the tree and he and she dropped, banging and scraping and groaning against the fall of rock.

They hung there for she knew not how many stunned moments; then, bringing them back to sick consciousness, came a shriek more dreadful than any even Fragoletta had ever heard or dreamed of—the shriek of an animal-woman defrauded of her mate; the shriek that, in the instant of the loss, accepts the same death as the bitterest-sweet penalty of that lost love; the gone-mad voice of poor Julie Joy singing the swan song of her love:

"See, it is written; it is written!" Then, far down in the unspeakable depths to which her slim body was shooting, like a voice from the innermost bowels of the earth: "Ro-man-o! Rom-a——" Then silence; silence again.

And then, high above them, cries and shrieks and lamentations—her father's, Frollo's and the other men who had accompanied Julie on the chase she had planned.

After a long while there was silence. To the two who dangled there, too weak with horror and exertion to fully appreciate their danger, there came the sounds of departing—leagues, it seemed, above their heads. Then, ages afterward, the sound of some one sobbing very softly—Tonio weeping for his love.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

IN THE CAVE OF THE BATS

IT seemed hours later when Romano said wearily:

"I am going to gain my foothold now and make for the cave, if I can."

There was a sound of his feet scraping on the perpendicular rock, then a sound of satisfaction seemed to indicate that he had grasped something.

"I shot the rope pretty accurately; the cave is right at my head." Then, in a minute more, a sound of satisfaction and his voice again: "I have found some tufts here that grow near to the top; they stand my pulling on them, so I can get into the cave and then pull you after me and we are safe for a time."

Romano suited the words to action, and before she realized it Fragoletta's pain-racked body was bumped into the cave and then seized in her lover's arms in a very passion of tenderness for her suffering and mad love for herself.

In the frenzy of that embrace the chase, the fright, poor Julie's tragic suicide—all was wiped out. They forgot even the horror in which they knelt, so absorbed were they in holding each other close, conscious that they still lived, still loved, could still hope for a life beyond these horrors that pursued them.

At last Romano spoke.

"Tonio may and may not take up the chase in Julie's stead," he told her. "I don't know. He was mad for the girl, and he may get the wild notion that he must carry out her will and separate us; or your father may urge on the pursuit and find willing allies in the rest of them. For safety after the bitter fight we have had, we must spend at least the night here, darling; then I think we shall be safe. We will make the ridge again; I can do it by those tufts of grass, and we will go into the village. There we will be married and then we will take the long trail, the safe trail, and forgot all this that has been before."

Fragoletta shut her tired eyes as though Romano's picturing of these dear delights soothed her like a lullaby.

Romano, noticing her weariness and her pleasure in the tale he told, continued softly:

"Sometimes we will stop in the towns and read the books that are there; perhaps we shall go to school for a while, you and I. We know so very little, after all; then, when we weary of the urge and fret of the busy towns, we will take to the trail again and sleep close in each other's arms, under the wise old stars. Oh, we will live, my Fragoletta; we will live. All this will be a dream, my girl, which you will forget when you learn how a Romany can love, Fragoletta, Fragoletta."

But the warmth of his kisses awoke no customary answer. The exhausted girl had fainted. Romano held her in his arms, kissing her and calling her till the night fell again, and like blankets of dark, horrible fur, from every nook and cranny, from ceiling and from floor, the bats arose, circled, thudded with one another horribly, brushed Romano's face with shuddering, awful wings, swooped for the outspread gold of Fragoletta's curls.

Romano, from the depths of his nauseated soul, prayed that the girl might remain in her merciful swoon. He feared for her reason.

The moon arose at last, with the white, it seemed to the lonely man, to-night of a shroud—the shroud of Julie Joy, perhaps.

Romano, rising and bending to keep the gruesome.

winged things from attacking Fragoletta, tried to think the thing out; tried to wonder why he couldn't have pleased his grandmother, loved Julie Joy and kept the life in her body by that love, instead of doing as he had done, so that she lay to-night shattered beyond recognition at an unspannable depth, while he, amidst horrors unheard of, sat with a girl in his lap, dearer than all the world—a girl who bore with her an inexplainable curse.

It was all beyond Romano.

Presently Fragoletta stirred and tried to sit upright. Romano tried to hush her, to soothe her to slumber, to induce even the faint from which she was cruelly enough emerging.

"What is it?" she whispered. "Oh, Romano, Romano, what are those things? Romano"—she began to sob like a child terrified beyond all bearing—"Romano, they are bats; millions and millions and millions of bats! Romano, they will brush me with their silky, furry wings. Oh, help me. Oh, I am afraid, I am afraid!"

"Courage, my life!" whispered the man. The boy Romano was gone forever. "The morning must come at last. Shall I sing to you, sweet, sing of the trail we take, far from all things like this?"

Fragoletta screamed again; shudder after shudder seized her slender body, which her lover gathered to him as though he would absorb her into himself and thus shield her from the horrors of velvet wings that seemed to rise noiselessly from the ground, hordes unending.

"I see one that looks at me, and it has Julie's eyes!" she shrieked; "Julie's dead eyes, and they seem to want me to jump over the cliff as she did! Oh, Romano, hold me so that I won't! Make Julie stop looking at me with her awful, dead eyes!"

Romano held her still closer; his own blood was pounding in his temples. He was only a boy in years, and the piled-up horror of all that had transpired, and was still transpiring, pressed upon him heavily.

But his love for Fragoletta was even bigger than himself or anything within him. It swallowed up his world and fear and hope and pain and suffering. It was his world, his heaven, and, it could be, defrauded his hell.

"Poor Julie is not looking at you, my own life," he crooned. "She is harmless now. You are tired, my baby, my girl, and you are imagining this. Lie still on my heart, Fragoletta, and I will sing to you and keep the bats away. Lie still, oh, Love; lie still."

Then, in the dark and gruesome cave, from the rock wall that dropped to its hideous depth, where lay the bones of Julie Joy, commingled with heaven knows what poor victims else, the voice of the lover rang clearly, strongly forth:

"The sky and the sun and the wind
And one on the road I fare;
Slender and gypsy-skinned,
My gypsy ways to share.

"Life that is void of stress,
Love that is leal and true;
The road and the wind's caress,
Sun and the sky and you."

The "and you" swelled out triumphantly, and, as if in acknowledgment of love that is victor of life and conqueror of death and all the power of darkness, the bats sank to noiseless rest; the morning star swam up in the pale gray to bid farewell to the slender moon, and the lovers slept, dark head bent protectingly over the head of gold.

On the morrow the lovers woke to the sun high overhead and a new hope springing in their hearts.

"While we are fresh," whispered Romano, "we will make for the ridge again. No one can harm us. With Julie Joy's urging done, none of the tribe will wish to harm their king. My grandmother is very old. I doubt that she has rallied from the fever she was in. As for your father, he is a wretched victim of some delusion, Fragoletta, and that has made him older than all age. We have nothing to fear from him. As to Tonio, I doubted his intent; but as he seems to have taken the thing quietly enough we had better venture forth."

Romano readjusted the rope, paying it out so that he might have plenty of leeway to make the actual landing on the summit before dragging Fragoletta after him. Fragoletta twined her arms about him and kissed him long and tenderly before she let him go. So dear had he become to her that the very thought of his possible danger stabbed her with an unbearable terror.

"I have been a coward," she whispered, "in all these other things, but I have borne them, at least. I have lived; but you—the loss of you, oh Romano! that, that I could not bear."

"You will not have to, my life," whispered the man again. "Now stay carefully here on the edge, darling, and as soon as I make the summit I will haul you up to safety at last. Be as limp as you can, and the bumping against the rock wall will hurt you less. Of course, I will be as gentle as ever I can."

Romano wasted no more time, but, creeping to the edge of the cave, held on to the rope and dropped. A moment later Fragoletta, peering over in terror, saw him struggle for the hardy little tufts of grass that had saved them the day before, and finally make the ridge in safety. She thought she saw him sway a bit uncertain as he stood there and pass his hand over his brow, and a sick terror assailed her lest, just as safety lay in the very palms of their hands, it would be lost to them. But he regained his balance and the control of himself, however he had lost it, and with a shouted, lusty "Now!" he hauled the rope and she dropped down, with an inrush of her breath, then felt herself being drawn up, up, up to safety, too, just as gently as the hauling hand could make it. She found herself saying some sort of a prayer for the love of Romano, and the next thing she knew she was on the ridge, struggling with Romano's help for her feet, and standing at last beside him on the very spot, had they but known it, from which Julie Joy had leaped to her death.

An excess of love of this man overwhelmed Fragoletta. He had been so tender, so strong, so true, so loving.

She raised her left hand and patted his cheek, stroking it, soothing it, crooning to him:

"I love you! Oh, my Romano, I love you, I love you!"

Suddenly she grew rigid with terror. The stroking hand ceased, grew rigid and dropped. Romano's face had turned livid, his eyes rolled in his head, she felt his knees sagging and he fell inertly to the ground, perilously near to the suicide ridge.

Fragoletta, with a groan of pure anguish, bent over him to raise him, then she raised her left hand to the light and screamed aloud.

It was streaked and banded with thickish blood.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE COLONEL TELLS A STORY

BY nightfall it was all over the country-side how the "mad" daughter of the Ravenels had come stumbling, falling, calling down the most obscure trail of the mountain-side, half dragging, half carrying her lover, from whose mouth blood was streaming and on whose brow was the death sweat.

Only those in the gypsy encampment knew what actually took place as Fragoletta, pulling her almost miraculous burden, staggered into their midst.

"Help," she was calling and sobbing and praying, "help! He is dying, he is dying!"

Carla had rushed to her first, and then she, too, at sight of Romano's face, had burst into tears.

Then had come the yellow colonel from some obscure corner. He had taken one look at the livid Romano, one look at his daughter's hand, then he had cried in a mighty and terrible voice:

"It is the cursed hand! It strikes always in the tenderest spot—in the tenderest spot! Woe to you, my daughter; I have been warning you all these years—in the tenderest spot. I have been guarding you from such a fate as this, keeping from you all things that would make you feel affection, and now——"

Fragoletta went up to him, after giving Romano into the hands of Carla, who laid him on the grass and was bathing him with her tears and the water from a basin Frollo had brought.

"Father," Fragoletta was saying clearly, "the time has come for you to tell me what this curse it. If my lover is to die because of it, then I am to die, too; but before we die I must know what it is that is killing us. I must know what it is that kept me in the House of Silence all these dreary years. If you have been right and I have been wrong, if I have brought death upon Romano, whom I love beyond all power of belief, then at least I must gauge my wrong or yours; else, father, I will come back to these scenes of my torment an ever restless shade. I have had no peace from life thus far, save in his tender arms; then do not doom me to unrest in death if I must follow him there."

Perhaps the old colonel was drawing to the close of his sad life; perhaps, just there at the end, he felt some of the lucidity of his young sanity came back to him, an interval as it were, before he left; or perhaps it was love again—the young fervor of his daughter's love quickening his speech within him.

Whatever the cause, he broke the silence of the years. He told the story of the cursed hand:

"Years ago—not so very many in actual years, but centuries in the internal hells through which I have gone—I was, as perhaps some of you know, called the pride of the Southland. I was a cavalier of the ladies; nothing was so pleasant to my eyes as the flash of a slim ankle, the lure of a bright eye, the gleam of a saucy curl; nothing so beguiled me as the music of a young girl's laughter. There was wild blood in me, I suppose; all the Ravenels were wild in their twenties, and my mother often said to me that the wildest blood of the wildest Ravenels seemed distilled again and dropped into my veins, along with a little quicksilver.

"My next hobby was a blooded horse, and I had the finest the South could boast. Many there are to-day hereabouts who remember young Ravenel on his coal-black steed, with his coal-black hair and his habits of a squire of dames."

Fragoletta, bending with Carla over the silent, fast-breathing, beaded Romano, glanced up at her father in stark amaze. Could this be the aged keeper of her tomb—this man, suddenly erect, the faint flicker of old fires in sunken eyes, a certain fiber to the weird, intoning voice? Surely, surely the day of miracles was far from being past.

"Of course," the colonel was saying, "I had not met Felicity Savage then. I would to God that I had; she would have saved me from the curse of the cursed hand; she would have spared the sunshine to me and to our baby, poor little Fragoletta, there.

"But I didn't meet her until later, and then it was too late; but I want to say here, so that my story may be better understood, so that the effect the thing had on me may be appreciated, that I loved Felicity Savage as I believe no man has loved before or since; at least"—as his old eyes caught the look on Fragoletta's face bent above Romano's—"at least, I so believed with all of me, with all of me.

"Well, it was on one of my wild rides over the countryside that I encountered the gypsy maid Wilda. She was the daughter of your Queen Tarantella and the aunt—or would have been had she lived—of young Romano here."

Fragoletta started and her face whitened. What horrid complication was coming now? Her father noted the movement and his face saddened with pity.

"My poor lamb," he said quietly, "I have brought you nothing but pain and misery and gloom, and now I must affront your young ears with the unlovely story of a young man's folly; but as God is my judge, though my sainted Felicity who died for my wrong, though they hear me this day. I swear that it was nothing but that—a young man's folly when his blood was warm.

"The girl Wilda and myself fell unreasoningly in love with one another. There was no talk of marriage, there was no talk of anything except the mutual love we felt. We rode together—wild rides; I can feel them yet—the warm, Southern wind in our faces, the rush of our steeds beneath us, the sun lighting us to fresh follies, or the moon quickening us to wilder dreams. It was an interlude; I had many of them. I never dreamed but what the caravan would go its way and she with it, and that there would be the usual spell of pain, and that would be the end of it—fresh loves for her as well as for me, new trails, new faces.

"Just before her tribe planned to break up the encampment I met your mother, Fragoletta. I met Felicity Savage at the governor's ball. She was just a vision in white tulle and ruffles, the widest hoop at the ball, the daintiest, merriest feet, the whitest arms and neck, the most bewitching smile."

The old man, made young in the telling of his tale, broke off and fell into a reverie.

No one dared to interrupt lest the spell fall from him and he lapse again into the yellow horror he had been ere love laid a spell upon him, rejuvenated him and made him speak in the tongue of his vanished youth.

Romano seemed to be sleeping. Carla bathed his brow and Fragoletta held his hand to her warm, young heart as though she would never let it go.

Inside the main tent could be heard the stertorous breathing of the Queen Tarantella, already beyond the hearing of the colonel's story.

The colonel roused himself and continued.

"If I had been born that very night full-grown," he resumed, "I could not have been more completely made over than that first sight, that first dance with Felicity Savage made of me. I suppose it was merely a case of meeting, at last, the right woman, that is all; but it seemed more than that to me; it seemed a direct gift from heaven; it seemed a new life, distinct and apart, from all the previous one. Everything that I had done, all that I had been, dropped away and was no more. I felt no shame for my past amours; they simply ceased to exist for me, and with them ceased to exist the gypsy Wilda.

"I rode no more to the gypsy clearing to wait for Wilda. I kept no longer the many secret trysts at the many secret hours. I simply danced perpetual attendance on Felicity Savage day and night, night and day. I had no other thought, nor wished to have.

"At the end of a fortnight of pure bliss she consented to be mine. Oh, Felicity, Felicity! with your dancing feet and your merry smile—the years that cover that night are heavy, heavy with terror and grief."

Fragoletta's eyes quickened with tears; she clutched her lover's hand still closer to her throbbing breast, but she leaned over and gave her father's a swift stroke, too, half fearful lest this pity-winning, broken figure of a man would relapse again into the terrorist he had been to her shivering childhood.

The old man smiled at her and something like the moisture of tears softened his own eyes.

"It didn't last very long," he said. "One night, just after I had returned home from an evening of planning our wedding and honeymoon with Felicity, the gypsy girl Wild accosted me around the side of the house—to the right of the house, there where the yews are thickest and where the ribbon road skirts it. She was a veritable fury; her face was lashed with blood; she looked like a demon. 'I hear you are to wed a girl from the North!' she raged at me. 'Is it true, you dog; it is true?'

"Stung by the name she called me, I spared her no mercy. 'Yes, gypsy,' I flung back in the young cruelty of young anger, 'yes, it is quite true. What then?'

"'You desert me?' she hissed, baring her teeth—ah, I

can see them yet." The old man covered his eyes with his shaking hands and Fragoletta murmured so that he could hear:

"Poor father! Poor, poor father!"

"'I do not call it desertion,' I answered her; 'it is too heavy a term for so light a thing.'

"She wheeled on me at that—I should have been wiser than to offend a gypsy love—and shrieked like a lost soul. 'A light thing—you call it that? A light thing that you rob my mouth and rifle my body and filch my soul—light! Well, then death is lighter and you go not to the white arms of your fair bride, oh, Squire Ravenel, for your light love shall starve between!'

"With that she whipped out a short, bright knife! God, how bright it was, how cruelly it gleamed, how hungry it looked!

"She whirled on me with it and would have caught me in the heart had I not thrust out my left hand to ward her off. As it was, her hand recoiled by impact with mine, and, by one of those horrors we can never fathom, it pillowed itself in her own breast. The blood gushed forth, covering me, and she dropped with a groan at my feet.

"I was mad with fear. Here was I on the eve of my marriage, on the eve of my almost unspeakable happiness. So tremendous had it seemed to me that I had felt all along as if, all underserving, something would come between me and my bride. Now, it seemed, it was to be this—this dead gypsy girl, killed by my hand, yet not by any hand but her own. I determined that, as the misdeed was not mine by an intent on my part, I should not suffer the consequences. At the very least, trial and horrid explanation and all the rest of it, resulting in, if nothing more serious at least, the exposure of my relations with the girl and the sure revolt of my sainted Felicity."

The old Southerner, never more so than now, turned to Fragoletta and bowed apologetically. "I crave your pardon, my dear," he said, "it is only one, and I hope the last, of the many wrongs I have done you that your ears must be offended by this tale of your father's indiscretions.

"To resume: I therefore picked up the body of the dead girl and bore it to the stream, swollen with much rain water and with a quite perceptible current. This current I knew would surely bear the body past the encampment and there be found.

"As the gypsies had been having considerable trouble with one thing and another at that time, I counted upon it that, along with their being fatalists of sorts and the girl dead, anyway, they would hush the matter up rather than noise it abroad. The girl might have been thieving or up to some other mischief, for all they would know."

Carla frowned at this and the men who were listening scowled and muttered. The old colonel kept his eyes fixed on his daughter's face and paid no heed to the others.

"I was right," he said; "there was no commotion made. But on the eve of my wedding Felicity Savage, I was again accosted as I entered the afterward called House of Silence. This time it was by an older edition of the dead girl Wilda; so like was the resemblance that in the dusk I started and would have cried out.

"The woman advanced upon me, menace in her very air. When she was quite near to me, her face within an inch or so of my own, there in the yellow dusk, she spoke to me. The tone of her voice was so horrible that the chill that struck to my marrow has stayed there ever since; not even the arms of Felicity were able to warm it away.

"'A curse upon you and upon yours!' she hissed. 'The curse of the blood-streaked hand! I call to the gods to witness a curse, a curse that upon you and upon those of your blood you bear, traced upon your palm the fate of the cursed hand! This is it—that in your tenderest spot shall ye be stricken. Upon the murderous hand of you and your line shall the streak of the girl Wilda's blood appear whenever your dearest love is at stake. Horror and death and blood your fortune from this hour—horror and death and blood!'

"With these menacing words the woman vanished, leaving me temporarily shaken and distraught.

"Then I shook it from me. A nearer, dearer happiness was waiting at my door, and, in the glow of my great anticipation, I forgot it.

"On the following day I wed Felicity Savage, among the rejoicing of the county.

"That was the last occasion on which fun held sway in the home of the Ravenels.

"The next event that took place there was the birth of Fragoletta and the death of my sainted Felicity.

"I had all but forgot the curse, when, on the night Fragoletta was born, I was waiting outside Felicity's door.

"I realized more than ever in that hour of anxiety my overweaning love for the girl who was making the battle for life with death inside her chamber. I realized to the very core of my tenderest spot how dearer than my heart's blood she was to me.

"All at once I heard a little shriek. The second nurse, who had been summoned when we saw Felicity was making a dangerous, perhaps a losing fight, appeared and was staring down at what I could not discern at first.

"I was nervous and overwrought. 'What are you staring at?' I asked sharply. 'What do you see?'

"She only continued to stare and point a shaking finger at my left hand. I looked down, and it seemed to be streaked with thickish, sinister blood.

"I gave a muffled scream and simultaneously the other nurse and the doctor appeared. 'It is all over, Mr. Ravenel,' said the doctor in his most compassionate tone; 'your wife is dead.'

"I do not recall what I did. I only know that I was kneeling by her bed, kissing her closed eyes, kissing her mouth, still twisted from her pain, calling her, calling her. I know that the doctor lifted me from her bodily, at length, and that one of the nurses, who looked to my frenzied eyes like a menacing gypsy, was showing me a squalling, reddish atom.

"'Take her away!' I remember yelling. 'Her hand, her hand, there is blood upon her hand!'

"'There is nothing at all the matter with her hand,' I remember the doctor saying soothingly. 'It is a perfectly good hand with five very active little digits.'

"I have a still more confused recollection of the awful days that followed. I know that I dug Felicity's grave underneath my own window and lined it with roses and violets; I know that I laid her to rest; I know that the nurses, staring at me and whispering when I appeared, stayed around for a few days, then departed.

"I have vague memories of poor Jude mothering Fragoletta, at first efficiently, then, even to my distraught mind, far from that. I recall a few efforts on my part to see that the child survived and a faint but persistent knowledge that all the slaves had departed save Jude, and that she, in the horror of my presence, was going mad. I also remember that I did not care.

"I know that I ordered the house shut up and neglected, and Fragoletta knows better than I the years that have followed.

"The curse 'took,' and now it has, even as she, who lies nigh death within, has said, it has descended upon the next of my line—descended in the person of her own grandson. It was to avert this that I tried to keep you, Fragoletta, from caring too much for any one thing. I kept your hand bound up because I lived in hourly terror of that sinister band of blood.

"And it has overtaken you at last. Well, that is the story of the cursed hand; that is the tale of the doomed Ravenels. It is told.

"Fragoletta, Fragoletta, even as your father, in your tenderest spot—in your tenderest spot!"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE LIFTING OF THE CURSE

As the old colonel ceased speaking, the vicarious fire died from his eyes, the air, with which in sorry imitation of his departed days of cavalierly bearing he had worn, fell from him; he sagged again and the yellow tint to his countenance became evident.

But the old horror seemed, at least, gone. There was the brooding stupidity of senility there now; nothing else.

He seemed, after some dreadful fashion, content; as if, in telling his story of the cursed hand, he had, in fact, passed it on to the next generation and given that generation to understand that it must handle it as it saw fit.

There fell a certain silence; then Fragoletta spoke up sharply:

"Light a fire, Frollo; Romano is still breathing, but he is chill. I think this is only a great tiredness, and perhaps the curse as well. But I am going to fight it. Carla, will you help me?"

"Of course. What do you want of me?"

"First we must warm him thoroughly, then we must pour some wine down his throat; then I shall call to him—call and call. Once he called to me and saved me when my soul was dying. If it is his body that is dying I can call him, too."

Frollo and the men grumbled a bit; a couple of the other women scowled.

They had not liked the colonel's story; they felt resentful of these people who had spoken so hardly of the gypsies; they were ready to serve their king, who, they privately thought, was as good as dead, due to the frightful curse, invoked by some subtle irony by one of their own tribe—that one, their queen, sick to death from the resurrection of it in her tent.

Fragoletta saw their hesitation and, with her sharpened wits, guessed the cause of it.

With unconscious coquetry she turned the large wonder of her violet eyes on the men and spoke simply.

"I am innocent of it all," she said, "all."

And, being men, if they were gypsies, they answered the call of those melting eyes, the need in that musical voice, and flew to do her bidding.

As the fire was built the old colonel dropped into a fitful slumber, leaning, incongruous pose, against the tent rail.

From inside the royal tent could be heard an occasional groan from the dying sovereign. Two women who bore her company could be heard moving about in the tent.

When the fire was built, Fragoletta and Carla brought pillows and blankets and improvised a bed. Then they, as tenderly as ministrants could do, lifted the heavily breathing Romano onto the bed near the blaze.

One of the women began to wail:

"The king is dying, the king is dying! I see it written on my palm! I see——"

Fragoletta wheeled on her; all the gentleness had gone from her eyes, all the music from her voice.

"Your king is not going to die!" she rasped. "He is going to live despite the cursed hand; nay, he is going to live because of it!"

With a superb gesture she sprang from the recumbent Romano's side and stood above the fire. The flames lit her gold hair to living red; she poised above it like some delectable human offering given by an insatiable god.

Then she bared one arm and thrust her left hand into the licking flames.

It is a tradition in the tribe that no agony came into her martyred eyes, only a great ecstasy of sacrifice, only the holy light of the self-made martyr.

When she withdrew her hand the delicate palm was charred and the skin blistered and peeled beyond recognition.

"I have burned away the fate of my fathers!" she cried. "I defy the curse of the Romanys! Blood shall be cleansed by fire, it has been written. The curse is lifted. Romano, Romano!"

At this instant one of the women ran from the royal tent. She was wringing her hands, and—an irrelevant touch—her brass earrings jangled and caught the gleam of the flames that had licked guiltless of line or cuticle the palm of Fragoletta.

"The queen is dead!" she cried. "Tarantella is dead!"

Amidst the confusion that took place no one save Fragoletta bent over the awakening Romano.

Perhaps the wine revived him; perhaps the fire's warmth; perhaps the curse was veritably lifted, placed there by his grandmother to fall fatalistically enough upon him, whom she had adored.

At any rate, he came out of the long, semi-comatose faint in which he had been to the love-torn, pain-torn face of Fragoletta bending above him.

In tones broken with her vast love of him she told him what she had done, and it is another tradition of the tribe to-day that his tears, wrung from his pity, dropped on the seared and defaced little palm and healed it overnight, leaving it pink and whole, but with another line of fate etched across it.

Probably that is but a tradition; probably Fragoletta's palm took just as long to heal as any girl's would who has thrust it into the living flames to burn a curse away.

But if it took her palm the legitimate length of time to heal, it did not take Romano and her a legitimate length of time to wed, considering the respect they should have felt for the demise of the aged Tarantella and the tragedy of Julie Joy.

"But," said Romano the next day, as they wound their love-radiant way to the neighboring town to search for a parson to wed them, "the Queen Mother was very old and poor Julie is dead. We are young and strong and we have suffered so. I want you now, my darling life, before anything again can come between us. You saved my life and it is yours, my queen, forever and a day."

A week later the bride and groom fitted up a royal caravan and started out on a wonder honeymoon.

Years have passed since the lifting of the curse from the house of Ravenel.

The old colonel spent the remainder of his days—always quiet and forlorn, but never again the wild, eerie creature he had been—with an obscure and all but forgotten cousin on a not distant plantation.

Old Jude went to the heaven to which her loyalty no doubt entitled her.

On the site where stood once the accursed House of Silence stands now a fair and stately, if slightly smaller, replica. It is built partly with the Ravenel money, of which there is plenty now that there is some one to look after affairs, and partly with the practise of the rising young lawyer, Romano Ravenel, who has taken that name in order to perpetuate it.

He took three years and studied law, while Fragoletta studied with a tutor and went to lectures in New York.

After that they returned to the old site, and, after the colonel's peaceful death in Fragoletta's arms, built their home there.

A sturdy, small edition of Romano plays about the ancestral plantation now, and it is merry with the small doings of a social world and gay with the prattle of childish tongues.

Yet, ever and anon, over the road that skirts the house like a ribbon to the right, a single caravan will be seen going over the crest. The gypsy Romano will be driving, and by his side, golden head on his shoulder, will be the girl Fragoletta.

And, floating back over the ribbon road, an eternal lure, an insistent call will be his strong voice calling in the wind:

"Follow the Romany patéran
West to the setting sun."

The Girl Who Broke The Bank At Monte Carlo

BY EDGAR SALTUS

IN Paris last winter there appeared in the *Figaro* a despatch of which the following is a literal translation:

Monte Carlo, January 17.—A beautiful miss, Mlle. Bowers, of Buffalo, U. S. A., won a million francs this night. The game at the middle table was suspended. We are enjoying a weather superb.

Despatches such as the foregoing are advertisements. Their insertion is paid for. The facts they purport to relate are imaginary. That is the rule. This was the exception. Moreover, behind the facts recited there was a story, one which constituted the central situation of a little tale of love and roulette.

Here it is:

I

If there be men uglier and stupider than God intended they should be, that girl's father was one of them. Not long ago he provided Nice with an excellent vitascope representation of the man who has seen worse days and never intends to see them again. Born indigent, he had, through the process of wanting what he wanted more determinedly than those with whom he came into contact, made a fortune. In addition, through one of those miracles which may be attributed to our climate, nature had provided him with a daughter who was a beauty. He was short and obese, very bald, and his complexion had the hue of a brandied cherry. In commercial transactions he was astounding, it was in family matters he was stupid, and worse, for he was pig-headed and cross. With wealth had come ambitions. Paragraphs in the papers had given him food for thought. He wanted to mix with the nobility. He wanted also to avoid a certain young man. For these reasons he vacated Buffalo and took ship for France. Paris filled him with hatred. The only nobleman he encountered was a waiter who robbed him unblushingly. Already the list of resounding names published in the European edition of the *Herald* had decided him to go to Nice. Coincidently the young man appeared. Mr. Bowers set off at once. In leash was his daughter.

She took the bank-notes and planked them down on black.

Her name was Gertrude. She was nineteen, the image of spring, and cared as much for the nobility as you do. In Buffalo she had succeeded in losing her heart and all desire to recover it. The finder was John Frederick Jarvis—Jack for short. He was three years her senior, and Mr. Bowers' pet abomination.

After Mr. Bowers had sailed for France, Jack had no scruples to prevent him from crossing by the next ship; no objection whatever to putting up in Paris at the Grand Hotel. It was when Mr. Bowers encountered him there that he set off for Nice. The arrival of the one and the departure of the other occurred within twenty-four hours. Meanwhile, Mr. Bowers expressed his views to any one who would listen; the young people saw of each other what they could, and when the girl had gone, every one, even to the unblushing waiter, knew why.

The latter became very sympathetic.

"That old ruffian," he said, "wants to marry his daughter to a title. Now I am a prince," he added, and he told the truth. He was a Milanese of excellent family, and had been an officer in the Italian army until a bad night when he was caught cheating at baccarat. Socially he died there and then. But the animal that survived had to be fed. For the provender required he became waiter, and it was splendid last winter at the Grand to hear the maitre-d'hotel, after he had seated you, shout: "Prince Paul, serve this gentleman!"

"I can adopt you," he continued. "Make it worth my while, and the necessary papers, drawn at the legation, will constitute you my heir, and consequently prince."

"All right," said Jack; "I'll go you for a hundred."

It cost him a thousand before he got through, but it enabled him to follow Mr. Bowers to Nice, and sign himself there Prince of Monterotundo.

"Impostor!" Mr. Bowers gnashed at him when he dis-

covered who the Prince of Monterotundo was. "I'll unmask you!"

Nor was he apparently mollified when the circumstances were explained.

"A fake title—that's what it is!" he repeated, with much emphasis and venom—"a fake title!"

But it impressed him. "I should not mind so much," he said to Gertrude, "but he is a gambler. He is after you for your money, for my money, and not a rap shall he get."

"He isn't," said Gertrude.

"Isn't what? Isn't a gambler, I suppose. It is dollars to doughnuts that he is at Monte Carlo now. I would rather see you in your grave than married to a gambler. In Buffalo he played poker all night. Old as I am, I have not touched a card in my life. I despise a man who does."

When Gertrude wrote to her lover the next morning—for write to him she did, and every morning and as often as not every evening, too—she said a great many things that were immaterial and extravagant, but wound up with this sage advice: "Now whatever you do, my darling, don't go to Monte Carlo, and if you must go, don't play. Promise me that you won't."

Of course he promised. If she had asked him to promise to become a Hottentot he would have done so. But he was young, and young people have poor memories.

While Mr. Bowers was making up his mind where he would go next, Gertrude and Jack promenaded the Promenade des Anglais, sat there and held hands, met under Mr. Bowers' nose and caressed each other with their eyes a dozen times a day.

"I think I'll take you to London," said Mr. Bowers presently. He had no such intention. He had been reading up guide-books, and it had struck him as a neat idea to go from Marseilles to Egypt and float his daughter up and down the Nile in a dahabiyeh of his own until she forgot all about Jack. How long that would take he had not calculated. But there is safety in flight. He felt that he was weakening and was too obstinate to show it. Now the only way to deal with an obstinate old person is to let him think that he is having his own way. In the process of holding hands Gertrude and Jack had put their heads together and so decided.

"You needn't bother," said Gertrude, "Jack is going back to Buffalo."

"Why?" Mr. Bowers with sudden interest and suspicion inquired.

"I think he doesn't care for me any more," that guileless little girl replied. But as she couldn't lie and not blush, she pretended to weep.

"H'm," said Mr. Bowers. Then he turned on his heel and stalked about. "Well," he exclaimed at last, "he never did."

Gertrude gave no heed to the grammatical confusion of that speech. She just sighed and tried to look wretched.

"Suppose we go to Monte Carlo," Mr. Bowers suggested. "It might cheer you up."

II

Monte Carlo is a caricature of Paris. The gambling halls are Sardanapalian. About the tables you will see cousins of emperors, grand-nephews of popes, kings discrowned, outlaws, honest men, cheap-trippers, Californians, Chilians, Russians, clerks from Threadneedle street, and Infantas from Spain. It is the sewer of every vice, the home of every luxury. The magnificence is brutal, the climate enervating. The air is heavy with violets, redolent of musk. There is a Babel of tongues that fuse into one, every idiom punctuated by the clink of gold, the click of the ball on the roulette table, the calls of the dealers at trente-et-quarante, the music and monotony of Rien ne va plus.

When Mr. Bowers and Gertrude entered the rooms, the evening was young, but the crowd was compact. At red and black a fat man was winning prodigiously. There Gertrude and her father loitered a while. From the neighboring roulette others, attracted by the rumor of the fat man's gains, moved over, and suddenly, through that phenomenon of real love, which, however absorbed we may be, notifies us of the presence of the one for whom we care, Gertrude turned. At the adjoining table Jack sat. His back was toward her; he was lost in the chances of the game.

Gertrude flushed. She looked at her father, but he was watching the fat man, and at the moment the girl, vexed at her lover's breach of faith, fearful lest her father should see him there, flushed again. Presently Mr. Bowers, weary of the fat man and his gains, moved away. As he did so Jack looked around, saw them both, hesitated a second, made a movement as though to gather in his coin, sidled from his seat and disappeared.

Mr. Bowers' eyes followed him triumphantly. "What did I tell you?" he shouted at his daughter.

The two now were directly behind the chair which Jack had vacated.

"The idiot has left his money here, too!" he cried.

The croupier threw over at them a bundle of bills. "Is it yours, sir?" he asked, vaguely perplexed at the transmutation of faces.

Mr. Bowers spoke French as you speak Choctaw.

"It is his son's," Gertrude answered in school-girl Parisian, but with school-boy cheek. "He has gone for a minute; he will be back."

"Good! Make your game."

Then just how it happened, how the father permitted it, how the daughter dared, no one may say, but into the vacant chair the girl sank, and in a rage at Jack, to punish him for his disobedience, in an effort to lose what he had left, she took the bank-notes and planked them down on black. There were six thousand francs. She did not count them; she noticed merely that there were some gold pieces remaining, and those she put on 19.

"Rien ne va plus—nothing more can be staked!" the croupier called, and you could hear the ball click as it spun.

"Come away," said Mr. Bowers fiercely.

"Black wins and the number 19," the croupier called, and on either side of him his mates began raking in the money of those who had lost, distributing the gains of those that had won.

To the six thousand francs six more were added. To the nine louis there came 324. Gertrude was furious.

She turned to her father. "No matter," she murmured. "I'll lose it all next time, and then we will go." Thereat she shoved everything, bank-notes and gold, the original stakes and the proceeds on the division known as Impair.

But the croupier had his eye on her. "It is over the maximum, madame," he cried. "The maximum is six thousand francs one hundred and eighty on the numbers."

Gertrude bit her lip in vexation. There were 18,600 francs before her which they did not seem to be willing to let her lose. Then an inspiration came. She put 6,000 on black, 6,000 on uneven, 6,000 on the last 18, 180 francs on 19, and was wondering where she could put the balance, when Rien ne va plus was called.

"If you don't come peaceably, I'll carry you out," Mr. Bowers gnashed in her ear. He was crimson.

"Nineteen, black, uneven and passe," the croupier called. Gertrude had won all along the line. The rumor of

it spread. The crowd, which had surrounded the fat man, surged to the roulette.

Two turns of the wheel and the girl had over $8,000 before her, behind her a raging parent, and in her heart dismay. The crowd increased. She could feel the eyes that were focused on her, feel too that she had been recognized, for she heard the whisper of her name. In the perturbation of the moment she omitted to stake. It was zero that turned up. Fate was against her, and on the green of the table she struck her little fist.

But no matter, in a few turns now she was sure she could be rid of the money. She mumbled as much to her father, the flush on her face mounted, the rhyme of her lips was set, and then there began a contest such as Monte Carlo had never seen, the struggle of a girl to lose and who won in spite of herself.

For an hour she played. There were times when the stakes were swept from her and her eyes lighted delightedly, but the next turn of the wheel would bring them all back, double them on a succeeding twist, triplicate them on a third. She wearied of tossing gold and notes about, she let money lie where it fell, and the series of blacks and reds, of even and uneven, of marque and passe that she chanced on, if disheartening to her, regaled the spectators. There were many betting where she did, moving their stakes when she was forced to move her own, applauding her openly, gratefully, too. So great was the crowd that there were those who played pot luck, who tossed out their money haphazard over the shoulders of others and recovered their gains as best they could. Before her there were great stacks of blue and white paper, columns of increasing gold. Behind her Mr. Bowers stood speechless. The other tables were deserted. People fought to follow her game.

"She's a mascot!" some one cried. He had the word. It was caught up and repeated. But her anger, which was evident, amazed.

"Rien ne va plus," said the croupier at last, with a smile at the feebleness of the jest. "My ladies and my sirs, the bank is suspended."

"Bravo!" shouted a Turk.

"Then send for more money!" hissed a Spanish grandee.

And ordinarily more money would have been sent for, but it was nearly twelve, the hour at which the tables close, and an inspector called that for that night play was done.

Gertrude had a fraction over $182,000 before her. She rose from her seat. She was for leaving it there. She turned to go. Abruptly her father recovered his speech.

"It is an iniquity, an outrage and a shame! You are disgraced forever"! he bawled, and caught her by the arm.

An attendant followed. He had the notes and gold on a platter. The crowd followed, too. An elderly man, handsome still, with a red ribbon in his buttonhole, approached and smiled and rubbed his hands.

"If madame prefers, the management will give her a check."

"But it isn't her money—damnation!" shrieked Mr. Bowers. "It belongs to Mr. Jarvis—it belongs to the Prince of Monterobusto, or whatever his fool name may be. It don't belong to my daughter! She shan't touch it! It belongs to him; and, by the Lord Harry, there he is now!"

So he was, and very sheepish, too.

"Oh, Jack," Gertrude cried; "how could you?"

"I pray you, no scandal," said the elderly man. "If you will be good enough," he added seductively, and before those three people knew what he was about he had them in a room by themselves.

"The long and short of it is this," Mr. Bowers began. But what he said only the manager heard. Gertrude was whispering to Jack. "It is his money," concluded Mr. Bowers. "Give it to him."

"I shan't take it," said Jack, primed now by his sweetheart. "I shan't and won't."

"Why not?" And Mr. Bowers stamped his foot. "Why not?"

"Because Gertrude won it. I didn't. There is only one way in which I could take it, and that I refuse."

"What way is there? What do you mean?" the father shouted.

"By marrying her," Jack shouted back. "And I have changed my mind. I have no wish to now," he added, but he spoke with curious significance.

"You haven't, haven't you?" shrieked the old man. "If you dare insinuate a word against my daughter I'll trample you under my feet."

"Oh, papa, don't," pleaded Gertrude.

"And I'd do the same to any one who did," said Jack superbly. "No, Mr. Bowers, I broke my word, I am not good enough for her."

"A fortune has been won," the manager interjected in the same seductive fashion.

"Oh, what's all this stuff and nonsense? If she forgives you, will you ever do it again? Will you promise us both never to touch another card?"

Jack turned to the girl. Where was her anger now? She was smiling and blushing like mad.

The answer, if mute, must have sufficed.

"Very well, then," said Mr. Bowers peevishly. "Get a check for your old money and let's go back to Nice."

They did, and it is the duty of the writer to add that, so soon thereafter as the formalities of France permitted, the girl who broke the bank at Monte Carlo became her sweetheart's wife.

Rien ne va plus.

WHY THE SEA IS SALT

ALL water that comes into the oceans by way of the rivers and other streams contains salt. The amount is so very small that it cannot be tasted. But all this river water is poured into the oceans eventually at some point. After it reaches the oceans, the water is evaporated by the action of the sun. When the sun picks up the water in the form of moisture, it does not take up any of the solid substances which the water contains as it came in from the rivers, and while there is about as much also in the air in the form of moisture, the ocean never gets fuller; the solid substances from the river waters keep piling up in the ocean and float about in the water there. The salt which is in the river water has been left behind by the sun when it evaporated the water in the ocean for so long that the amount of salt has become very noticeable, we are told by the Book of Wonders. The moisture which the sun takes into the air from the ocean is eventually turned back to the earth again in the form of rain. It sinks into the ground and on the way picks up some salt, finds its way into a river sooner or later, and then eventually gets back into the ocean. All this time it has been carrying the tiny bit of salt which it picked up in going through the ground. But when it reaches the ocean again and is taken up by the sun, it leaves its salt behind and so the salt from countless drops of water is constantly being left in the ocean, making it saltier.

THE MYSTERY OF A FACE

BY LURANA W. SHELDON

IT had been a dispiriting evening—the game lagged, every one was out of sorts, and I, perhaps, was worst of all.

Lawrence S——, my old-time crony, was the only one who seemed in any way contented or happy. But why should he not be happy? He was phenomenally lucky at cards, and, to disprove the truth of the old adage, equally lucky in love, of which fact I needed no further proof than the dull, aching throbs of my own sad heart whenever I thought of the woman he had won in perhaps the fairest and most important game that we two mortals had ever indulged in. Nothing had come to mar his pleasure in the four short years of his married life, while I—well, trouble, they say, never comes single-handed—was beginning to doubt if the sun ever shone.

And to-night was no exception to previous ones, so far as Larry's good luck in the game was concerned. He had won a small fortune on three of a kind, added to it materially with a generous flush, and finally settled his record (at poker) for life by winning a jack-pot of ten thousand dollars.

I was the heaviest loser to-night, and just once more, for the ten-millionth time, I found myself wondering why Larry should have all and I nothing, or nothing to speak of, in the game of existence.

And at exactly that moment a gentleman arose from the table and declared his opinion that Larry was cheating.

From a friend, or an acquaintance, even, this might have been taken as a monstrous joke, for Larry was the soul of honor, as every one knew who had ever met him, but the man was a stranger—the only one at the table—a foreigner, whose letter of introduction from a mutual friend was the only claim upon our hospitality. I did not like him from the very first. There was an air of mystery about his small, sleek form, an expression of cunning on his swarthy features.

For the moment following his remark Larry only stared at him in bewildered surprise, but as I sprang to my feet to resent the insult, he seemed suddenly to comprehend the full situation and immediately hot words were exchanged between them.

Seeing that Larry's honor was considered by all present as their own, and that he had put himself in a dangerous position, the coward apologized for his accusation, but the look he gave Larry as he left the room would have filled a more timid man's soul with serious forebodings.

He had lost a thousand dollars and lost it to Larry, but ours was a rich man's club; we were all well able to lose heavily on occasions, and naturally we supposed he knew it.

For myself, I had never counted a loss but once, that was when Larry had won my darling. Some way from that time I could feel no loss—I had no interest in either time or money.

A few days after the event Larry told me that he had again encountered his insulter, but he assured me, with a degree of warmth, that we had all been mistaken in his nature, that he was really quite an agreeable fellow.

"Winnie likes him immensely," he said in conclusion, and by that I knew he had been entertaining the stranger. But the fellow never came to the club-rooms again, and I—I could never bother to remember strange faces.

At exactly midnight, just one month later, I passed the house in which Larry was living. There was nothing unusual about my passing, as I often returned that way from the club, but the earliness of the hour did seem remarkable, for it meant that I had left in the middle of a game of poker. Some way I had been nervous all the evening, and more than usually superstitious. It was just seven years ago that night since I met her first—she who was now the wife of another. My mind seemed reverting to her constantly, although at every raising of my brows I looked straight into the eyes of him who was my best friend and yet her husband.

As for Larry, he seemed dazed and dull. There was a far-away look in his eyes, and an automatic jerking in his movements that led me to look at him anxiously on more than one occasion during the evening. At first I thought that the turn of fortune had upset him, but Larry was always an easy loser; and then again I would catch him looking at me with such a troubled glance that instinctively I felt like reaching my hand to him across the table and assuring him that he could trust me—that even in my thoughts I would not wrong her.

I was the seventh man at the table—a circumstance that I ordinarily considered a lucky omen, and sure enough, as money goes, my luck had changed decidedly for the better.

I won the first pot of twenty dollars on three sevens, not needing the five and two, which, remaining in my hand, were significant once more of the lucky number. The second deal gave me only two small pairs and an ace, but in my peculiar mood I immediately discovered that added together they made twenty-one, another multiple of seven. Drawing on the third hand, I filled a straight flush, and the numbers five, six, seven, eight, nine added together made thirty-five, a third coincidence in my fortune. But this time I was decidedly nervous, and when once more I stood pat on four good sevens I was conscious of being more scared than pleased, for the thing seemed to me to be almost uncanny.

And so I had left them thus early in the evening, and lighting a cigar, strolled slowly homeward, my steps taking me involuntarily over the longer route, which led directly by Larry's dwelling.

And now, as I slowly passed the house, I was conscious of a sudden shock—an intuition that something terrible was about to happen. Involuntarily I glanced up at the door. The number upon it was seventy-seven.

Again there came that instinctive thrill—that warning of danger—not to myself, but—God forbid!—of danger to Winnie. I shuddered and caught my breath, then turned with an impulse I could not resist and retraced my steps by the silent house, looking up anxiously at the half-darkened windows, as if perchance I might read their secret.

As I reached the steps a maid darted, bareheaded, from a lower door, wringing her hands as in mortal dread, while her face looked as white as the face of death in the passing glance that I caught in the darkness.

Certain now that my instincts were true, that she, the

beloved of my heart, was in danger, I turned, hot-headed, to rush up the steps, then stopped as quickly at the reaction of judgment. For how could I enter her house at this hour—I, her husband's best friend—the ex-suitor who loved her?

For one moment I suffered the horrors of death, then my limbs growing weak, I must surely have fallen had not hope sprang anew as the door above me flew open.

In an instant I recognized the old English butler, but so fearful was the excitement under which he was laboring, that for a moment I believed he had gone stark-staring crazy.

There was horror in every line of his face—horror in his uprisen hair, and horror in his staring eye-balls. Down the steps he sprang, his face turned, as if by force, toward the open door, his arms extended, and his long, gaunt hands gesticulating wildly, as if warding off the unseen foe from which he was so swiftly flying.

With one great effort of the will I bounded forward and seized his arm, and the shriek that he gave as he felt my clutch sent the blood from my heart in a moment's terror.

"What is it, man? For God's sake what has happened?" shaking him like a reed. I asked him again and again the question, but whether the poor soul had lost his wits through fright or was laboring under some dire hallucination, he only muttered: "That face!" and breaking from my grasp, disappeared in the darkness.

Once more my limbs grew weak and helpless. Here, then, was proof of love's intuition; she was in peril, I knew not of what, but I thought kind fate was to be the avenger.

Almost certain that it was nothing less than murder, I sprang up the steps toward the open door with but the one thought to protect and save her. And as I reached the threshold another white-faced maid rushed past me.

"Stop! Don't go in!" she wildly cautioned; then as I caught her tightly by the arm, she too emitted a fearful shriek as if she had felt the grasp of some hideous monster. As she struggled in my hold I asked her over and over my former question:

"Is your mistress ill? Is she in danger?" But to every repetition she would only wail:

"That face! That face!" just as the butler had before her.

Tearing herself away at last, she sped down the street in a speechless flight, while I, now frantic from suspense, stood vaguely wondering what would follow.

Then suddenly it occurred to me that an officer would be the proper person to call upon in this strange dilemma. That there was some foul thing abroad, some thief, perhaps, if not a murderer, I was certain by the repeated words which both the maid and man had uttered.

I acted at once upon my own suggestion. Rushing three blocks away, I found my man and hurriedly told him the situation.

"I dare not go in without her husband," I cried, "but you—you surely have the right to enter!"

Without the least objection the officer of the law consented.

"It may be only a servant's scare," he said, but I was sure of my intuitions.

Standing on the steps, I saw him enter—heard him as he called my friend by name, listened to his footsteps in the upper hall, then heard him utter a frightful howl and come striding headlong down the stairs, dropping his club in his rush of terror.

I tried to clutch his arm as he came, but he brushed me aside as if I were a feather.

"Don't go in there, man!" he cried, as he passed me. "Her face! It is something awful!"

Once more I was alone with this unknown horror, the mystery of a "face" that I could not fathom.

Wrought up by emotions I could not repress, I stood for a moment almost writhing in torture: Whose face did they mean? Was it some mocking fiend? I was fast losing my reason in this awful conjecture.

Suddenly there came to me with overwhelming force the thought that my idol had become disfigured.

An injury, an accident, perhaps, and no one at hand to help her bear it!

Frantically I turned away, and rushed full speed to find a doctor. Explaining the circumstances as best I could, while he hurriedly dressed, the physician was soon in possession of my story.

"Is her husband at home?" he asked at last, and then only did I discover the length and breadth of my stupid excitement. I should have sent for him at once, but my wits seemed dull in the hour of peril. I stopped at the nearest station and wired to the club where I had left him engaged in playing.

Lingering by the still wide open door, I watched once more while the physician entered. At last I felt sure of some reward—I would at least find out if she were dead or living.

And then, after a grievous wait, in which my heart seemed dead within me, I again heard the footsteps in the upper hall, the voice of the physician calling upon his host or hostess, and then—then there came a fearful groan, and the sound of a heavy body falling.

For just one moment the silence of death seemed to swallow the echoes he awoke in falling, then white as a sheet and trembling as in ague, the physician raised himself from the rug at the foot of the stairs, and brushing past me through the door, was gone as if the demons pursued him. Not a word to tell me of her fate—not a syllable in explanation of this horrid matter. Only another pale face and staring gaze as the terrified physician, muttering those same strange words, fled past me and disappeared around the nearest corner.

Shaking with the very gravest apprehension, I could only clutch the cold gray stones as I crouched upon them in weak-kneed terror. Would I never know what this dread thing was—this mystery of a face that was so alarming? Would I never learn if my darling was alive or dead? Great Heaven! the very thought was awful! Dead! Dead! My dumb lips could hardly pronounce the word, but the agony of the thought restored my reason.

In another moment I had controlled my will and was hurrying in search of a coroner's office. She was dead, I was sure, by some cruel hand, and it was her pale, drawn face, perhaps gashed and bleeding, that had so alarmed these timid mortals. But, no! I was wrong, it could not be! Death had no terror for that brave physician.

Yet I must do my duty in case of doubt, and at last I found the man I wished—a night bell brought him to my assistance. Explaining the matter as best I could, we hurried back and the good man entered. But once more the results were just the same—the horrors within found a ready victim.

After an even longer wait, I heard the former scenes enacted. There, white with terror and speechless with dismay, my man flew past me down the stairs and the words "That face! That fearful face!" came to me in a mocking whisper.

Almost at my wit's end, I crept back slowly to the street, my brain half dazed by my strange position. These men were cowards, each and all, else why would they desert a woman?

It was only the consciousness of my love that kept me from entering the sacred presence. Did I know for cer-

tain that she was ill, no power on earth could keep me from her, but not knowing, the sense of loyalty to her husband, as well as the respect due her, must keep me in suspense a little longer. Inwardly I vowed it should be but little longer—for even now my brain seemed bursting.

At last Larry came—my despatch had brought him. I grasped his hand as he descended from the cab—it was wringing wet and cold and clammy.

"Something awful has happened!" I said at once. "Pray God you have come in time to save her!"

Then I told him with my trembling lips the awful scenes that I had witnessed.

With a languor (born of fright, I thought) he wrung my hand without an answer.

At last, then, help had come to her—I almost laughed in the reaction.

Standing now boldly in the open door, I watched him mount the stairs, then turn in the direction of his fair wife's chamber.

Was that a shadow that I saw above him? There was something or some one on the upper landing!

One, two, almost three moments passed—my heart grew lighter in my bosom—then suddenly there came a piercing shriek as if the strong man's very soul had been rent in twain by some awful vision. Breathless, white and staring, he came, his lips contorted in a spasm of pain, his eyes protruding in a sightless gaze and his every feature drawn with horror.

Like one benumbed I stood and stared, the one thought uppermost in my mind was that he too had thus forsaken her.

Down the steps and out into the night he went, his dumb lips forming voiceless words, his glassy eyes still set with terfor, but as he went his white face turned my way, as if his gaze was drawn irresistibly backward toward the door which yawned between him and that awful vision. At last, then, I was free to enter—the man, her husband, had deserted her, and to her aid must fly the one who long and patiently had hushed his love for her.

In an instant I had passed the door and was mounting to my idol's chamber.

Halfway up the stairs I met a man whose features seemed to be familiar, but the fellow, either through fright or weakness, tipped forward suddenly and rested his hands upon my shoulders. I would have spoken to him then and there, but for a moment my senses failed me. A numbness seemed to seize my members, an unaccountable dullness crossed my brain, but as the fellow stumbled by me down the stairs I awoke to the awful situation with the eagerness to fulfil my errand, increased tenfold from that moment's vagueness.

Sickness or death could not deter me—disfiguration or disgrace could not remove my longing for her. Fearlessly, my heart aflame, I reached her door and boldly entered.

Standing back towards me by an open hearth, I saw her in a posture of dejection. Her head was bowed upon her hands, the fine, full glory of her hair, now all uncoiled, concealed her features.

One stride and I was at her side, one loving word and her face turned towards me.

My God! Why was I not stricken blind? Why did I not succumb at once to this most awful revelation? One moment only I was forced to gaze, then reeling as from some fell stroke, I fainted before that sight of horror.

[This story is presented merely to interest our readers, and arouse curiosity about its proper ending. Unfinished stories are usually unsatisfactory and disappointing. Nevertheless they leave a lasting impression on account of their unusual character. The best example is Frank R. Stockton's "The Lady or the Tiger?" The mystery of solving the problem must rest with the reader, for it is fair to assume that even the author does not know what the explanation of the ending should be.—The Editor.]

MENTAL POWERS OF SIGNORINA AGNESI

A YOUNG lady, who appears to have been a kind of literary phenomena, was only about eighteen years of age. She was a walking polyglot. Not content with knowing all the Oriental languages, La Signorina Agnesi undertook to support a thesis on any science against any one who chose to contend with her.

At a *converzatione*, to which a Monsieur De Brosses and his nephew were invited, they found about thirty persons of all the European nations ranged in a circle, and La Signorina Agnesi, with her little sister, seated under a canopy. This young lady had a fine complexion and an air extremely simple, soft and feminine. His account of what passed is as follows:

"I had imagined when I went to this assembly that it was merely to converse with this young lady in the usual way on learned subjects, instead of which Mr. Belloni, who had introduced me, spoke to the lady in Latin, with college formality. She answered him extremely well; after which they began a dispute in the same language on the origin of fountains and on the causes of the flux and reflux which some of them have, like the sea. She spoke like an angel on this subject. I was then asked by Belloni to discuss with her in the same manner, provided that it was philosophical or mathematical. I was quite stupefied with fear on finding that I was expected to talk extempore and to speak for an hour in a language of which I had lost the use. However, I made her the best compliment that I could; after which we disputed at first on the manner in which the soul is impressed with corporeal objects and afterward communicates them to the organs of the brain, and then on the emanation of light and the prismatic colors. A Professor Loppin discoursed with her on the subject of diaphanous bodies and curvilinear figures in geometry. He spoke in French, and she begged permission to answer in Latin, fearing that she should not recollect the technical terms which she might want in the French language.

"She spoke wonderfully on these points, for which she could not have been prepared any more than ourselves. She is much attached to the philosophy of Newton, and it is marvelous to see a person of her age so conversant with such abstruse subjects. Yet, however astonished I may have been with her science, I have been much more amazed to hear her speak Latin with such purity, ease and accuracy that I cannot say I ever read any book in modern Latin written in so classical a style as that in which she pronounced these discourses.

"After she had replied to Loppin the conversation became general, every one speaking to her in the language of his country and she answering each in the same tongue.

"She told me that she was very sorry the visit had taken the form of a thesis; that she very much disliked speaking on such subjects in company. After we had conversed for some time, her little sister played some of Rameau's best pieces and then others of her own composition, concluding by singing a few airs in which she accompanied herself."

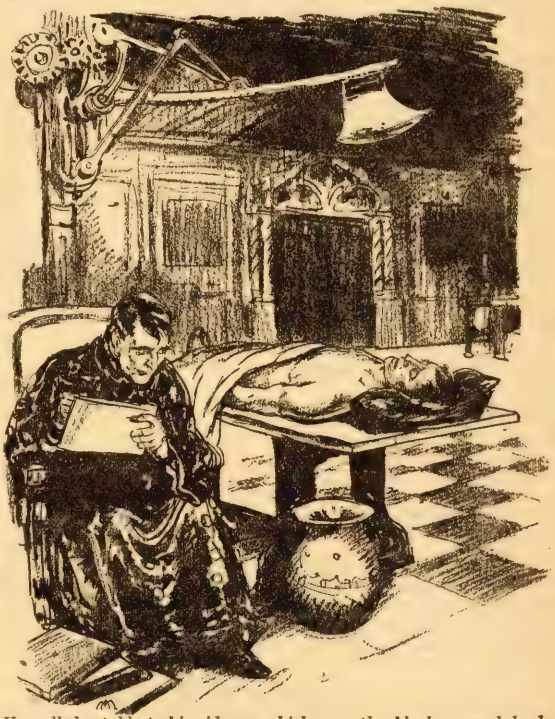
A STUDENT OF PSYCHOLOGY

BY EVERETT McNEIL

MY profession is traveling. I am a wanderer through choice. Thirty days is my limit. If I spend more than a month in one locality I become restless, feverish. I know what medicine will cure me, and I take it. I travel—anywhere, whither the winds of fancy blow. It is an exciting life, full of motion, variety, adventure, danger—it is living. To be in great peril of life, and yet to escape, whole of skin and sound bone, is good for the soul. Danger sends the blood jumping through the veins and claps spurs to every sense. It fascinates, enthralls, like old wine.

This manner of living has brought divers strange adventures, and made me an actor in some frightful scenes. I have felt the burn of the wounded lion's hot breath on my face. On the torrid level of the Great Desert, with hideous labor, I beat back Death, clutching at my life. I know the perils from wild beasts and wilder men of a journey through the gloom of the mighty forests and dense jungles of the upper Amazon. For twelve horrible hours I was captive to the bloody head-hunters of Borneo. Yet, it was not amid scenes such as these, but in the city of New York, on a clear June day that I walked, opened-eyed, into the most dreadful peril of my life.

This is how it happened:



He pulled a table to his side, on which was the black-covered book.

On the 25th day of a certain June, quite early in the morning, I strolled from my rooms in Perry street to the Washington Square Park, and seated myself near the Washington Memorial Arch. As I sat down a tall man crossed over from Fifth avenue, and walked slowly along the seats bordering the pathways of the park. He was dressed in a loose suit of black, and wore a slouching hat, pulled down over his forehead nearly to his eyes. He moved with a deliberate slowness, and carefully scrutinized the faces of the occupants of each seat as he passed —not rudely, nor so as to attract particular attention, but like a man who was searching for a countenance with whose outlines he was not exactly familiar. Presently he made a turn and came down the walk toward the seat I occupied. As he drew near I saw that his face was clean-shaven and milk-white, with huge beetling eyebrows overshadowing deep-set, reddish-gray eyes. Under his chin and extending halfway around his neck was a red mark, partly concealed by a black silk neckscarf. I once saw the corpse of a man who had been hanged, and the neck was disfigured by a similar mark. When directly in front of me the tall man paused and looked keenly into my face.

"The very man I want!" he exclaimed, under his breath, as a man will when the object of an ardent search suddenly reveals itself.

He stood for an instant longer, thrusting with his eyes, as though to make certain I was the right man; then he stepped quickly to my side, and bending down, whispered: "Young man, do you wish to earn ten dollars by doing ten hours' honest work?"

"Yes, sir," I answered promptly. I had no need of the money, but I was hungry for an adventure.

"Is there any one in the park who is acquainted with you?" was his next question.

"No, sir. I am a stranger in the city."

"Do your friends know where you are?"

"No, sir. When I last wrote to them I was in California."

"Are you easily frightened?"

"Sir?"

"Pardon; but the work I wish you to do is dangerous. Your friends may never hear from you again."

I hesitated, carefully reading the tall man's features. There was nothing in his face to arouse suspicion of evil intent; only I did not like the reddish gleam in his eyes.

"It is honorable, and your life will be in little peril; but it will try your nerve. Do not come if your nerves are weak." He smiled as he said this.

"I am ready," I answered, the fascination of the unknown danger hot in my blood.

"Take the Sixth avenue elevated as far as Fiftieth street, and walk west, on the right-hand side of that street, until you come to a house with a stone owl perched above its doorway. My servant will meet you there and show you to the right room." He thrust his hand into his pocket and pulled it out again. "Here are five dollars and a nickel. I pay half in advance and your carfare. Come at once," and, dropping the money into my hand, he walked away in the direction of Fifth avenue, not even turning to see whether or not I obeyed his instructions.

"An odd venture at labor extraordinary," thought I, as I arose from my seat and started for the Eighth street station. I was pleased. In this prosaic age one does not often come across an adventure such as this one promised to be.

I found the house with the owl perched above the door without difficulty. The moment I stepped within its vestibule the inner door swung noiselessly open, and a hideous, misshapen dwarf, with white, sightless eyes, and a huge, earless head took a step toward me, bowed, and turning, motioned me to follow. The dwarf was clothed in black velvet, and his slippered feet moved without a sound over the rich carpeting of the hall.

I entered, and the door shut silently behind me. At the farther end of the hall we stepped into an elevator and shot upward to the fifth floor. Here the dwarf pushed open the elevator door, stepped out, and again beckoned me to follow. We were now in a short, narrow hallway, dimly lighted by a swinging lamp, pendent from the ceiling. At the end of this hall was a door. The dwarf gave three sharp raps on the oaken panel, and the door slid open. A soft, yellow-tinted radiance flooded the hall, and I saw seated in a chair near the center of the room a tall man, dressed in a flowing robe made out of some rich Oriental fabric. It was not until I caught the reddish gleam of his gray eyes shining beneath their beetling eyebrows, and saw the red mark under his chin that I recognized the man I had met at the park. I wondered how he had reached the house so quickly.

"Kindly be seated," he said, pointing to a chair.

The dwarf vanished, the door closed, and I was alone with my employer.

I am not a nervous man. My courage has often withstood the supreme test. I know it was not cowardice that opened wide the doors to the shivering dread which now shook my heart. The portentous furnishings of the room, the feel of a subtle something in the very air itself, the gleam in the man's eyes—I feared I knew not what.

The room was circular in form, perhaps twenty feet in diameter, with a concave ceiling of heavy glass stained a dull, blood-red color. It had but one door and no window. The light came from a luminous globe of a cream-tinted whiteness hanging from the center of the ceiling. The decorations were Oriental in their richness of color and uniqueness of design. On the walls were large paintings illustrating the horrors of the Spanish Inquisition. The frightful vividness of the execution of one of these pictures fastened to my eyes with hooks of horror. It was entitled "The Pendulum," and depicted the scene from Poe's tale of "The Pit and the Pendulum" at the exact moment when the great steel crescent fell to within an inch of the wretched man's bosom. The agony and dread in the eyes and on the face as he lay watching the great ax, awaiting the slow death, burned their hellish torment into my soul.

"The damnable fiends!" I exclaimed, moved even to audibility by the painted tortures of the scene.

The tall man smiled. "No wonder that picture moves you strongly," he said. "It is a study from life. The artist painted it sitting by the side of a State criminal who suffered death in exactly the manner related by Poe."

"My God!" I cried, horrified, tearing my eyes from the hideous thing. "The painter must have been a devil!"

A little to my right, on a table standing under the lamp, and protected from the dust by a large bell jar, was the skeleton of a baby—pitiable relic of martyred innocence. Directly across the room I saw a hangman's scaffold, draped heavily in black crape. The rope was cut, and the severed noose lay on the floor underneath. Involuntarily my eyes turned to the red mark on the tall man's neck.

"I will explain about the scaffold later on," he remarked quietly.

I started. It was uncanny to have one's thoughts answered.

"If you should disappear, how long do you think it would take your friends to trace you to New York City?" This was asked in a cool, matter-of-fact way.

"About three weeks," I answered, thinking it best to make no more of the matter than he did.

"Good! It will then be too late to do me harm. But I must not waste your time. Excuse me for a minute. I need an instrument from another room." He arose and walked to the door. With his hand on the knob he paused to say: "You will find a pitcher of lemonade on the table by the scaffold. If you are thirsty, help yourself." The door slid open and he passed out.

I was thirsty, and at once went to the lemonade, poured out a glass and drank it. It was delicious. I emptied another glass, and then being close to the scaffold, began to examine it with more care than I could from where I had been sitting. I picked up the noose, but instantly dropped it with a shudder. It was red with blood.

Near where I stood was a lounge. I sat down on it to dress my courage and to prepare to meet pluckily the ordeal which I now felt to be near. Immediately a sensation of pleasant warmth pervaded my body, accompanied by a feeling of extreme lassitude. I seemed to be losing all of my muscular strength. Red lights, like danger signals, flashed before my eyes. I saw double. Objects in the room grew shadowy, and advanced and retreated before my eyes in the most unaccountable manner. My thoughts began a fantastic kind of wool-gathering. The scaffold, with all sorts of horrid things dangling from its noose, danced and swung in front of my face. The tall stranger turned an amazing double somersault, and landing in front of me, pointed to the red corrugation under his chin and grinned. I heard the cry of the bones in the bell jar, and the wretch in the picture tumbled to the floor, and writhing horribly, rolled toward me. Then came an overpowering desire to sleep, and, lying back at full length, I closed my eyes. Dreamily I wondered what it all meant—these strange sensations.

The lemonade must have been drugged!

The thought startled me into a momentary activity, and I half sat up—only to fall back into blackness and nihility.

What an awful thing it is to have the conscious life driven out of the body! To be as helpless as the dead, and yet, to live. The thought of it is appalling! What horrible things might be done! The uncertainty terrifies.

Possibly my dreadful experience has made me a coward, but never will I voluntarily suffer my body to be thus robbed of all of its natural defenders—not even by friends. I know the fearful possibilities of such a condition.

With the first glimmer of returning consciousness I was sensible of an extraordinary feeling. I vaguely tried to comprehend its import. My brain became clearer. Ah! Horrors of hell! No—yes—my God, it was true! I had no body! All sensibility ended with my neck. I opened my eyes and looked into the pale face of the tall man.

"Yes," he said coolly, "you are only a head and neck. I had no need of your body; in fact, it would have been in my way, so I have killed all its sentient life. It is still joined to your neck, but you cannot feel it. The sensation must be peculiar." He placed a cold hand on my forehead, bent down and examined my eyes closely, felt the pulsations of the veins in my neck, and then, standing up, recorded his observations carefully in a small black-covered notebook which he held in his hand.

My head rested on a thin, soft cushion, so that it was slightly raised, and, by glancing downward, I could see my body. All the clothing had been removed, and the body lay white and motionless as a corpse, with arms and hands stretched close to the sides and legs, decently straightened, on a slab of white marble. I could turn my head from side to side; I could even lift it a very little from the pillow; but I had absolutely no control over my limbs, and not a sensation of life came from below my neck.

Words are powerless to make others comprehend the dread I was in. What terrible scene was this the frightful prelude to? I looked into the face of the tall man, but I could read no answer to my thoughts on that stone-like countenance; nor could I see aught in the room that would indicate my fate; but I saw enough to awaken the most dreadful apprehensions.

The man had thrown aside his robe and stood in his shirt-sleeves, as though prepared for arduous labor. The room was small and oval-shaped, with walls draped in black velvet. So far as I could discover, there was not a window nor door to the chamber. The silence was absolute. Not a sound came from the outer world. Three large arc lights flooded the room with an unnatural brilliancy. Some two yards from my feet stood a skeleton, staring menacingly. On a small, round table near my head lay a number of black-covered books, similar to the one the man was writing in, and on each book, save one, sat—grisly paper weight—a human skull, with a black number printed on its white frontal.

The tall man closed his book and looked straight into my eyes.

"Young man," he said, in much the tone and manner of a medical professor addressing a class at the dissecting table, "I am about to begin the work for which I brought you here, but before I do so I will answer some questions, which I observe have been troubling you. I am a student of psychology, especially of that branch of the science which has to do with the effect on the human mind of approaching death. This subject was suggested to me by my own experience. You have doubtless noticed the red mark under my chin." He paused and touched the scar with a white finger. "The hangman's rope made it. I was once condemned to suffer death on the gallows for a crime I never committed. Fortunately my innocence was discovered in time to save my life, but not until I had experienced all the feelings of death and had become insensible. The sensations I felt were so remarkable, so interesting and scientifically valuable, that henceforth I determined to make death my life study. These little books," he picked up one of the black-covered volumes from the table, "contain a record of my most interesting and valuable experiments. There are twenty-four of them, and each tells how a human being died, with an exact scientific account of all the attendant phenomena. The one I hold in my hand is No. 15. He died by fire. This," he lifted another of the books, "is No. 11. He was shot through the heart. No. 8 was crucified; No. 8 I had dismembered; No. 7 I drowned in a glass tank; No. 19," he touched the skull-less booklet, "was the baby whose bones you saw in the bell jar. I cut out its heart so skilfully that for an instant I held it beating in the palm of my hand. This one," he lifted a volume of double the thickness of the others and held it with loving care, "is a treasure. It is the record of the death of a man whom I confined in a strong iron cage and slowly starved to death. He made a splendid fight for his life and did not die until the thirteenth day. During all that time I hardly ate or slept, so absorbed was I in studying the man. The skulls which you see on the table with the books are the heads of these men, preserved for further investigation.

"Horrible! Yes, I know how all unscientific minds regard such acts. To-day I am a murderer; and if the world knew of the deeds done in this little room, I should be hunted down like a mad dog. But to-morrow man will be busy hanging laurel wreaths on my tombstone.

"No, there is no escape. You are helpless. You are a stranger in the city. No one knows you are in my house. I can perform my experiment without fear of interruption; and then, well, your body will not trouble me. Look! Look, this is what I have done with the other bodies—what I will do with yours. I take no chances."

He stepped quickly to the side of the room, and, parting the velvet hangings, brought to view a heavy iron door, some three feet square. The door swung open, and I looked into a coffin-shaped furnace. Above the iron door was an electric button. This the tall man pressed. Almost instantly the furnace glowed with an electrical heat so intense that I could feel it beating hotly against my face where I lay.

"This is my private crematory," he remarked, smiling. "In one hour after your corpse goes in here it will be reduced to white ashes. The ashes I will carry to a cemetery and scatter them over the graves, so that your remains can rest in holy ground."

He closed the door, turned off the heat, pulled back the velvet, and, returning to my side, again fixed me with the reddish gleam of his gray eyes.

"Young man, when the hands of that clock," he pointed to where a round chronometer hung suspended from the ceiling directly over the head of the skeleton, "reach the noon hour, I will begin the experiment. Exactly six hours later it will come to an end, and the greatest victory of my life will have been won. It is now five minutes of twelve. Compose your mind for the coming ordeal. Ah, yours will be a glorious death, a martyr's death, and future generations will bless your heroism, your devotion to science, and enshrine your name among those of the immortals, even side by side with that of the greatest psychologist that ever lived." His cheeks flushed, his eyes burned, and for the first time he showed signs of the insanity, which evidently swayed the scepter over his brain.

I cannot write down the horror and dread I felt. There are depths of soul-agony which the plummet of human speech cannot sound. Words have not enough of throbbing life, of vivid coloring in them to picture the awful realities of a situation such as mine. If I could have given voice to my fears, if I could have shouted, cursed, prayed, it would have relieved the terrible pressure. But

I was speechless—breathless. Yet never was my brain clearer. The fearful art of the psychologist had crowded all of my sentient life into my head in order that I might feel with greater intensity the approach of death, and thus furnish him a more perfect study.

My eyes watched the clock. In three minutes more it would be noon; and then? I made an effort to compose my mind. If death must come, I would meet it bravely. Besides, hope had not yet deserted me. I must hold hard onto my wits, so as to be ready to grapple fast to every chance for life which came my way.

Another minute passed. The tall man was perfectly calm again. He picked up one of the black-covered books from the table. "See," he said, as he held it in such a way that I could read the label pasted on its back, "I have your book already marked."

This is what I read:

Subject—Number 25.
Death—By the Down-Swinging Ax.
Time—Six Hours.
Date—June 25, 18——.
Place—New York City.

At this moment the clock struck twelve. A gong sounded sharply. The skeleton lifted its right arm and pointed to the ceiling. My eyes followed the bony hand. Directly above my neck the ceiling parted from wall to wall, leaving an opening perhaps six inches wide, which ran at right angles to the line of my body. Through this slit I saw a giant arm of steel, gripping in its hand a great battle-ax, swing swiftly downward. With a sweep as wide as the room the ax descended. I heard the swish of its glittering blade as it rushed by, so near that to my terrified eyes it seemed as if it must sever my head from the body. Then the arm and hand shot upward through the ceiling, and the opening closed.

My eyes remained fixed on the spot where the ax had vanished. Would it descend again, and again, with each sweep coming nearer, and nearer, and nearer, until slowly, stroke by stroke, it cut through my neck? Was this what the label "Death by the Down-Swinging Ax" meant? The horror of the thought forced great drops of cold sweat out on my forehead. It would be like dying a thousand terrible deaths!

I felt, rather than saw, the tall man seat himself by the side of my head, just out of reach of the swing of the ax, and place his hand on my forehead. I did not look toward him. The awful down-swinging ax, the clock, and the grinning skeleton held my eyes. But I knew that his orbs were devouring my face, watching every emotion pictured there—aye, reading the very thoughts which surged and swirled within.

"Do not become unduly excited," he said, as he softly wiped the moisture from my forehead with a silk handkerchief. "There is no immediate danger. At the first stroke the blade of the ax came within six inches of your throat. Each succeeding stroke is just a little, a very little closer. It will take the ax exactly six hours to reach your life. The ax swings downward every two minutes. The gong and the skeleton will always warn you when it is about to fall. See!" As he spoke the gong sounded, the arm of the skeleton pointed upward, the ceiling opened, and the ax fell.

What if the machinery had not been perfectly adjusted? The blade might cut my throat at any moment! Death seemed riding downward on each stroke!

"No," replied the tall man, answering my thoughts, "the machinery is perfect. The fatal blow will not be struck until exactly six o'clock. At 5:30 the ax will cut through the skin of your throat. A half hour later it will reach a vital spot. You now know just when and how you are to die. There is no need of my giving you more information, and I can devote my entire attention to the study of your very interesting case, while you can contemplate undisturbed the slow approach of the down-swinging death. Young man, in the name of science and humanity, I thank you for your glorious sacrifice of self. These are my last words. "Good-by." He pulled a table to his side, on which was the black-covered book and a dozen or more sharpened pencils, and at once began a most careful and thorough examination of my condition. Every few minutes he would write down the result of his observations. One hand rested nearly all the time on my forehead, and frequently he would bend his face close to mine, and look steadfastly into my eyes for a minute or more. Once, when I closed my eyes, he forced their lids open with his fingers, and, holding them open, studied their expression with the keenest interest for fully ten minutes.

The feel of his hand, how it made me shudder! And his eyes! They seemed to have the power of hooking to my soul and drawing it from my body. But the ax, the ax, the swish, swish of the ax, rushing to my throat, crying for my life, ever creeping nearer and nearer to the white skin of my neck—words have not the strength to bear the weight of its horror!

One hour, two hours, three hours passed, and each moment the torment grew.

If I could have fought for my life. If I could have thrown myself upon the tall man, and in the heat of the fierce struggle met death. If a heavy blow from a club, the sharp crack of a pistol, or the quick thrust of a knife might have brought the end. If I could in any way have given vent to the dread and the passion within—— No; motionless, speechless I lay, while the tall man fingered my face and looked into my eyes; while the great ax swept downward, ever nearer and closer to the red life in my throat. The profound silence, the somber colorings of the room, the man sitting quietly by my head coolly watching me die, carefully studying and critically analyzing my agony—I know not how to put into words the dread and terror of it all.

At 5:25 o'clock the heavy folds of black velvet parted behind the skeleton, and the dwarf silently entered, carrying in his hands a large white bowl. This he placed under the marble slab, directly beneath my neck, and vanished from the room.

The vessel was to catch my blood!

How intently my eyes fastened themselves on the face of the clock! Four minutes more, three minutes, two minutes! The next blow would touch my neck!

"Clang!" like a clap of thunder sounded the gong, and the keen blade shot downward.

I tried to withdraw my throat from the kiss of the bright lips. In vain. A thread of pain darted across my neck, and a drop or two of warm blood slowly trickled down each side of my throat.

The ax had begun its fatal work!

My head whirled. The room spun around and around. I felt like a man in the grip of a whirlwind of fire. I was fast losing consciousness. Then I became sensible of the pressure of the cool moist palm of the psychologist on my forehead. The hand steadied my head, calmed the whirling storm within, and drove away the clouds. Again I could clearly comprehend all the horrors of my situation.

At first the pain from the ax-hurts was not great. At each blow I felt a sharp twinge dart across my throat, and an increase in the flow of blood. But as the ax bit deeper, a dull, throbbing, burning pain came and grew

with the wound, until the torment of its hurt racked my soul.

A thin, constantly widening streak of red now stained the sheen of the ax. I shut my eyes, but opened them again instantly. The darkness was grisly with unspeakable terrors.

The tall man smiled, and cruelly pressing his fingers on my hot eyeballs, compelled the blackness that I had thought God's mercy to escape. I struggled to open my eyes, but the cold fingers only pressed down the lids the more firmly.

From the instant the man had shut out the light from my eyes I had endeavored to measure the time by keeping note of the ax strokes. The blade fell every two minutes. It was 5:45 o'clock when my eyes were shut. I had heard the hissing fall five times. If I had kept true account, I had just five minutes more to live. But the agitation of my mind was so great that I could not be sure I had kept the tale aright. The next blow might be the death stroke!

Light! Light! Oh, for a ray of blessed light!

To lie thus in the darkness! The feel of the ax cutting, cutting into my throat——

Light! Light! God of mercy, give me light!

To hear the keen edge go hissing; to feel the ice-cold fingers pressing down the struggling lids; to be conscious of the steady gleam of the cruel eyes, watching, waiting for the death throes——

Light! Light! I must see before I die!

My prayer was answered. The finger tips moved quickly from off my eyelids. In the lightning's flash that followed I saw the tall man bending over me, the skeleton with uplifted arm grinning horribly, the clock——

The fatal moment had come!

A crash—the flash of the descending ax—blackness—insensibility.

I have not the slightest recollection of how, having died as I thought in that chamber of horrors, I came to be alive and lying in my bed in my room the next morning. Nor can I give other explanation of the scenes through which I passed than that set forth in the letter, as quoted below, which came to my hands on the third week from the day I made the compact with the tall man in the park.

(Without date or address.)

SIR:—Enclosed please find draft for $1,000.

By way of explanation:

On the first day of last May I wagered $50,000 with a friend that I could cause, through the force of mesmeric suggestion, a man to suffer without permanent mental or physical harm, all the realities of any death he might select. I made the wager, confident of winning, provided only I could find a subject possessing the right temperament. My friend was equally sure I had undertaken to accomplish an impossibility.

The gods sent you to New York and brought about our meeting. A glance into your face told me you were the man. I secured your services. You came to my rooms, which with great care and expense I had prepared for the experiment. The red mark around my neck, the hideous dwarf, the paintings on the wall, the gruesome skeletons, and the black gallows were there to awaken your dread and to prepare your mind to receive the horrors to come. The lemonade I had drugged with a chemical which has the peculiar property of rendering the mind especially susceptible to hypnotic influences, while recovering from its soporous effects. By the time consciousness had returned you were completely under my control, and all the horrors which followed, even in their minutest details, were hypnotic dreams, which I caused to live in your mind as I sat by your side with my hand on your forehead, while you lay on the lounge, where you had fallen when the drug brought unconsciousness.

Cruel?

Yes; but $50,000 is a large sum, and I had need of the money.

Let the enclosed $1,000 blunt, somewhat, the edge of your wrath.

Respectfully yours,

A STUDENT OF PSYCHOLOGY.

HINDU SWORD SWALLOWING

"THE sword used has some resemblance to a common one in shape, except at the handle, which is merely a part of the blade itself, rounded and elongated into a little rod. It is from twenty-two to twenty-six inches in length, about an inch in breadth, and about one-fifth of an inch in thickness; the edges and point are blunt, being rounded, and of the same thickness as the rest of the blade; it is made of steel, smooth, and a little bright.

"Having been visited by one of these conjurers, I resolved to see clearly his mode of performing; and for that purpose ordered him to seat himself on the floor of the veranda. Having satisfied myself with respect to the sword, by attempting to bend it, and by striking it against a stone, I grasped it by the handle and told him to proceed.

"He first took a small phial of oil, and with one of his fingers rubbed a little of it over the surface of the instrument, then stretching up his neck as much as possible, and bending himself a little backwards, he introduced the point of it into his mouth, and pushed it gently down his throat, until my hand, which was on the handle, came in contact with his lips. He then made a sign to me with one of his hands to feel the point of the instrument between his breast and navel; which I could plainly do, by bending him a little more backward, and pressing my fingers on his stomach, he being a very thin and lean fellow. On letting go the handle of the sword, he instantly fixed on it a little machine that spun around, and disengaged a small fire-work, which encircling his head with a blue flame, gave him as he then sat, a truly diabolical appearance. On withdrawing the instrument, several parts of its surface were covered with blood, which showed that he was still obliged to use a degree of violence in its introduction into his anatomy.

"I was at first a good deal surprised at this trick; but when I came to reflect a little upon it, there appeared nothing at all improbable, much less impossible, in the business. He told me, on giving him a dollar, that he had been accustomed from his early years to introduce at first, small elastic instruments down his throat and into his stomach; that by degrees he had used larger ones, until at length he was able to use the present iron sword.

"The greatest flexibility of the jugglers' joints and muscles, the laxness of their fibers, and their temperate mode of life, render them capable of having considerable violence done to the fleshy part of their bodies, without any danger of inflammation, and other bad effects, which would be produced in the irritable bodies of Americans. Witness their being whirled around on the point of a pole, suspended by a hook thrust into the fleshy part of their backs, without experiencing any fatal consequences.

"There is, therefore, no great wonder, if by long habit in stretching up their necks, they are able to bring the different windings of the passage from the mouth to the stomach into a straight line, or nearly so; and thereby slide down the sword into the latter organ without much difficulty."

FOR LOVE AND FREEDOM

By SAMUEL CHARLES STEINHARDT

SIX men sat at a table in the comfortable smoking-room of the Lotus Club. Among them were men distinguished in art and literature. James C. Roach, the inimitable Irish *raconteur*, dug a choice nugget out of his inexhaustible repertoire; Julian Rie, the artist, told a tale of life in the South Seas; Amos J. Cummings related an incident, and, turning to Colonel Dick Chester, the oldest man in the party, said:

"Come, Dick, spin us a yarn about times before the war. Give us a personal reminiscence."

Mellowed by wine and soothed by the aroma of Havana, the colonel needed no urging. He began:

"It was in the good old days before the war, sah, that war in which I drew my sword for the Confederate States of America, and I'm proud of it, sah, proud of it. I went to New Orleans to purchase some plantation hands, when, while examining some slaves in a lot about to be sold under the hammer, a handsome mulatto, whom I had determined to buy at any price, stopped me and prayed that I purchase her and set her free, for she had a husband and child. She cried most piteously and said that although she was a slave owned by De P——, her husband was a poor, free man. Her master had failed in business, and his slaves and chattels were about to be sold to the highest bidder.

"I tried to explain to her that she was in the hands of the sheriff and must await for the foreclosure sale on the morrow; but, woman-like, she only pleaded the more and spoke of her 'pore man a-worryin' ter home in the cabin an' her little chile a-cryin' for his poor mammy,' until I promised to purchase her and to go and comfort her husband. She told me the way to the cabin, and as I left her tears flowed afresh as she sobbed: 'May de Lord eber bless yer, massa; may de Lord eber smile on yer way.'

"After about a quarter of an hour's walk I reached their little cabin and, opening the door, stepped in. The place was but a poor affair, such as the negro cabins seen all through the South to-day, which make no favorable comparison to the healthy, capacious quarters and cabins on the old plantations. The scene that met my eyes as I entered I shall never forget. In the middle of the room was a table, at which were seated two men. One was the negro, who sat staring at the cards his companion held, trembling violently and once in a while rolling his eyes and muttering fragments of a hymn or prayer in his great agitation. Opposite him was a flashily dressed young man, whose reddened face told as plainly as the flask beside him that he had been drinking.

"As I entered he turned and said: 'Ah, here's another blood after the handsome wench. Well, all I can say is it's no use. She's mine, eh, nig, ain't she? Yer want to pay fer her, do ye? Come, nig, don't sit there trembling. Drink, drink, I say! By G—d, man, if yer don't drink and stop rolling those hoodoo eyes of your'n the deal's off. There, that's right, nigger. Feel better, don't yer?' Then turning to me again as I stood there indignant and questioning, he said: 'Now, stranger, you'll have ter wait till after this deal, 'cause yer see here's my badge. I'm a depity sheriff, that's what I am, and a piteous man; so when I calls here an' sees this nigger all broke up an' down on his luck an' the little pickaninny there, why yer see I'm a piteous man, I'm a piteous man, so I says: 'See here, nig, yer haven't 'nough money ter buy yer wench, have yer?' He says, 'No.' 'Well,' says I, bein' a piteous man, as I says before, 'yer play poker like all free men, don't yer?' He says 'Yes' again. 'Well,' says I, bein' a piteous man, 'here's a thousand dollars or the wench, an' if I win I get you an' the kid.' Well, what do yer think? The nigger was a-scared to play, an' began to mutter somethin' about 'her boy,' when I told him it was his last chance and put up five hundred dollars more, an' told him the best two hands out of three won. Well, stranger, he come around all right an' here we are. I won the first on my deal, he won the second on his, an' here's for third. 'Come, nig, brace up. Life on a sugar plantation is short an' sweet.'

"I guessed what his game might be, sah, so I said: "You have no objection, sah, if I deal, have you, sah?' at the same time drawing the revolver I carried and covering him. He muttered something about being as honest as I was, but at the click of the trigger as I cocked it he passed over the cards, saying he knew I'd see fair play done.

"Imagine the scene that was before me, sah. The darkening cabin, through the dirty western window of which one might see the sun sinking in golden and crimsoned glory, the reflection of which reddened the walls as with blood; the two men as they sat there, one drinking from the flask to steady his nerve ere the cards were dealt, which might mean the loss of his paltry gold, and the poor negro for whom those cards would decide all—wife, child and freedom. Seated on the floor was the innocent child, gazing with frightened eyes at the agitated countenance of his father.

"I am a Southern gentleman and have never thought to cheat at cards but that once, when I was tempted, sah, sorely tempted; but it was my honah, sah, and the honah of a Southern gentleman must be upheld at any cost, so I dealt those cards honestly, even though I made up my mind to buy the freedom of those three, if it cost me my life. I hesitated, sah—I hesitated, but every moment increased the agony of that wretched nigger, so I gave out those cards.

"The first card the negro received must have been a high one, for his face lit up and then darkened as the other cards came. There was a smile on the face of the deputy as he received his cards, and he turned and said: 'I reckon this is a square deal, stranger.'

"I stepped over and looked at both hands, and, as I did so, my face paled and the tears came to my eyes, sah, for the gambler held three aces, a king and a jack; the negro a pair of two, a king, a five and a six. The gambler, seeing me bend to look at his cards, scowled and sat back in his chair, and when he drew one card I could only judge from his appearance that the luck was with him. As the negro drew three cards to his pair of twos I watched his hand. The first drawn was a king, the second a two, and on the honah of a Southern gentleman, sah—on the honah of a Southern gentleman—his next card was another two. The darky gazed at that hand and lost all fear for the moment, but his stake was too great, and while he was somewhat calmer, the same nervous dread and trembling still possessed him.

"All depended on one card, sah—all depended on one card. Did the sheriff get that other ace? I watched, pale and anxious, as the gambler threw down his three aces, saying: 'Well, nig, I've got you this time. Come, drink with yer new master. Drink, yer d——n slave, when yer told!' It was but a quavering voice that answered: "I beats dat, massa.' But the deputy flushed angrily as he showed the remaining pair of kings, and the darky dropped his four twos with a loud 'Hallelujah! hallelujah! T'ank de Lord! Oh, my soul! T'ank de Lord, foah He is good an' hears us in our sorrow! Oh, Lord! Oh, massy be t'anked to the everlastin'! Hallelujah!' The sheriff interrupted with: 'Shut up, ye d——n fool yer! Yer haven't yer money or the gal yet.' 'No, sah, but he's going to get them,' said I, as I again brought my revolver into play and pressed its muzzle against the scoundrel's forehead—'and d——n quick, too!'

"He began to argue that it was none of my business, that I had insulted the majesty of the law and such rot, sah, but I silenced him at once and he signed that woman's release; then, to punish his insolence to the nigger, I compelled this officer of the law to pay the fifteen hundred dollars, threatening to shoot him on sight if he breathed a word of the transaction, and when everything was arranged I knocked him down and kicked him out, for no one dare attempt the honah of a Southern gentleman with impunity, sah.

"I cannot describe the joy of that poor nigger when he fully realized the stakes he had won—wife, child, freedom and fortune, sah—think of that, at a game of poker. He got down on his knees and gave thanks and crouched around my feet, claiming I was 'a blessed angel sent by de Lord in His goodness and massy,' to comfort him in his tribulations, and wanted me to take the money and beseeched me to bless and kiss the little pickaninny, sah, but I don't kiss niggers, sah, I don't kiss niggers, and I hurriedly told him I would go with him to his wife if he'd stop all his foolishness. That fifteen minutes' walk was like an hour to me, sah, even though joy lightened our footsteps, and during the glad reunion of husband, wife and child I stole away unnoticed before they could get troublesome again.

"Well, sah, there's little else to relate, but that I—er—a friend of mine—er—helped—oh, there's nothing more, sah—— Waiter, waiter, did you hear, sah? Drinks for the boys, sah, drinks for the boys."

Julian Rie got up and insisted on shaking hands with the colonel, declaring with all his powerful voice, "You're a brick, sir; you're a brick," and no one doubted his word.

PERPETUAL FIRE

CAPTAIN BEAUFORT, of the Royal Navy, F.R.S., among the interesting details of his survey of Karamania, or the south coast of Asia Minor, describes this curious phenomenon, and from his account the following particulars are extracted:

Having perceived during the night a small but steady light among the hills—this was represented by the inhabitants as a yanar, or volcanic light—and on the following morning curiosity led him to visit the spot.

In the inner corner of a ruined building he came to a wall, so undermined as to leave an aperture of about three feet in diameter and shaped like the mouth of an oven. From this aperture the flame issued, giving out an intense heat, but without producing any smoke on the wall, and although several lumps of caked soot were detached from the neck of the opening, the walls were scarcely discolored.

Trees, brushwood and woods grew close around this little crater, a small stream trickled down the hill in its vicinity, and the ground did not appear to feel the effect of its heat at more than a few yards distance. Not any volcanic productions were to be perceived near to it, but at a short distance, lower down on the side of the hill, was another hole or aperture, which had apparently been at some remote period the vent of a similar flame.

It was asserted, however, by the guide, that, in the memory of the present race of inhabitants there had been but one such volcanic opening, and that its size and appearance had been constantly the same.

He added that it was never accompanied by earthquakes or noises, and that it did not eject either stones, smoke or noxious vapors; but that its brilliant and perpetual flame could not be quenched by any quantity of water. At this flame, he observed, the shepherds were in the habit of cooking their food.

Mount Chimæra, near Phaselis, emits an unceasing flame, which burns day and night.

Within a short distance is the great mountain of Takhtalu, the naked summit of which rises in an insulated peak 7,800 feet above the level of the sea.

In the month of August a few streaks of snow were still discernible on the peak; but many of the distant mountains of the interior were completely white for nearly a fourth down their sides. It may hence be inferred that the elevation of this part of Mount Taurus is not less than 10,000 feet, which is equal to that of Mount Ætna.

Such a striking feature as this stupendous mountain in a country inhabited by an illiterate and credulous people cannot fail to have been the subject of numerous tales and traditions. Accordingly, the captain was informed by the peasants that there is a perpetual flow of the purest water from the very apex, and that, notwithstanding the snow which was still lingering in the chasms, roses blew there all the year round.

He was assured by the aga of Deliktash that every autumn a midnight groan is heard to issue from the summit of the mountain, louder than the report of any cannon, but unaccompanied by fire or smoke.

He professed his ignorance of the cause; but, on being pressed for his opinion, gravely replied that he believed it was an annual summons to the elect to make the best of their way to Paradise.

However amusing this theory may have been, it may possibly be true that such explosions take place.

The mountain artillery described by Captains Lewis and Clarke in their travels in North America, and similar phenomena which are said to have occurred in South America, seem to lend some probability to the account.

The natives have also a tradition that, when Moses fled from Egypt he took up his abode near this mountain, which was therefore named Mossa-Dagby, or the mountain of Moses.

Between this story and the yanar, as it has been described above, may there not have been some fanciful connection?

The site of this volcanic opening is at an inconsiderable distance from the mountain, and the flame issuing from the thicket which surrounds it may have led to some confused associations with the burning bush of Mount Horeb, recorded in Exodus.

THE GHOST AND THE JEWELS

I AWOKE this morning in the ward of a hospital, the most interesting patient, the house physician tells me, that has ever been received here since the building was erected.

The interesting part did not lie in the fact that I had been found unconscious in the street with apparently no trace of injury or illness upon me, but because when the ambulance surgeon examined me for papers he found that my pockets were fairly bulging with precious gems, the value of which meant a princely fortune.

I was weak and dazed when the doctor told me about it, but noticing intuitively how keenly he watched me, and how suspiciously he and the nurse glanced at each other now and then, I hastened to rally my returning strength in order to tell him as quickly as possible the details of my most horrible experience.

The gems on her brow seemed to shake and quiver. She was dancing for joy, this unearthly old creature.

It is not often that a man gets lost in the woods adjoining his native village, but in the darkness of last night's sudden storm I strayed from the path, and soon had lost my bearings completely.

With astonishing swiftness the sky became as black as ink, and the rain began falling with hardly a moment's warning.

On and on I went through the rain and darkness, getting more and more confused about my location, as I noticed no lights, even in the distance.

I knew that the woods extended many miles toward the city, but whether I was headed toward the town or for home I could not discern in the impenetrable darkness.

I remained under the trees as long as I dared, then fled from their protection in awful terror, as the lightning struck one and shivered its branches.

There was nothing to do but search for shelter. I rushed hither and thither in the darkness and cried aloud, hoping that some one would hear me.

I was wet to the skin and breathless from running, yet I dared not stop my running for a single moment.

Suddenly in the light of a blinding flash I saw before me the outlines of a house standing by the roadside, but a few steps distant.

Even in the first moment of delight I was thrilled with alarm at its unexpected presence in that spot. I knew the district as well as I knew my farm, and I was positive there was no such house within fifty miles of that location.

A feeling of horror swept through my brain — the sight of the house had completely unnerved me.

Yet there it stood, grim, silent and spectral. There was not a glimmer of light from basement to roof, and the whole architecture of the house looked strange and unearthly.

The wind swept by me in furious gusts, the rain poured down and threatened to engulf me. There was nothing to do but rush to the house and trust to the Fates for my night's protection.

I pounded on the door, but there was no response. In sheer desperation I broke in a window.

When I was safely inside and away from the storm, I found that I was able to think more calmly. A thrill of relief passed over my form, yet my heart seemed to sicken and sink within me.

The atmosphere of the house was cold and damp, there was the odor of a vault in the room I had entered.

Hastily scratching a match, I looked around. Wonder of wonders! I had found a palace!

The draperies, although musty, were rich with gold, the furniture was heavy and the carpet like velvet.

I called aloud to my unseen host.

Surely some one must inhabit this princely dwelling.

But the echo of my voice came back to me in such a hollow moan that I fairly trembled. In spite of the hangings and furniture of the place, my cry had resounded from room to room, and returned to me as empty as though I had screamed in a tunnel.

Such a curious matter affected me strangely. It was another proof of the unnatural appearance of the house, and yet I was inside it and it had not crumbled.

Creeping from room to room, I inspected the dwelling, finding luxury and magnificence everywhere, but no sign or sound of a living tenant.

At last I became too drowsy to feel afraid, and too utterly weary to spend more time in speculation. Whatever it was, it was a shelter from the storm, and if it was deserted, my presence would not harm it.

Cautiously I groped my way to the stairs, then climbed them in search of a sleeping apartment. The velvet carpet was like moss beneath my feet; an army might have tramped up those low, broad stairs and never have disturbed a sleeping inmate.

In the upper hall the air was better, but there was still that dampness that chilled one's blood—that charnel-house odor that froze one's marrow.

Opening a door at my right, I entered a room—another match showed me that it was what I longed for.

There were gorgeous hangings on every side, and a massive bed occupied one curtained corner.

Between two heavily draped windows stood a rosewood dressing-case, composed of drawers and a plate-glass mirror.

But the broad, velvet sofa was what I sought. It was a pity to soil the bed with my rain-soaked garments.

I turned the key in the door before I lay down, then smiled a little at my own precaution. I would hardly be disturbed in this deserted abode, unless it was by spirits or uncanny creatures.

I fell asleep, wondering about the house, about its presence and its gorgeous furnishings. The storm was raging as hard as ever—the last I remembered was a peal of thunder.

Suddenly I awoke from a heavy sleep, and in a moment I had arisen to a sitting posture.

My hair was standing upright on my head with fright. I could feel my limbs stiffening as the thrill of terror swept through them.

What was it that trespassed on my stolen rest? I tried to cry out, but my tongue was speechless.

There was a hand upon the door that led to my room. Oh, how glad I was that it was securely fastened!

I strained my eyes, and my heart stood still. One moment of suspense, then—the door was opened.

Great God! What manner of thing was this? What hideous apparition had appeared before me?

Moving slowly, but screeching with shrill laughter as he came, a fearful, wizen-faced old hag approached me from the open doorway.

I saw distinctly her sparse, gray hair framing her blear eyes and shrunken neck—then the skeleton-like arms, the wrinkled breasts—then——

As if I had been struck with a heavy hammer, I fell back, stunned, among the pillows.

Was it woman or ghost that stood before me? A wraith from the tomb or the infernal regions?

It was only a head on a scrawny neck, a pair of arms set in bony shoulders, but below there was nothing in the shape of limbs or body.

Screaming with laughter, this thing floated by at about the height of a medium tall woman, and as it moved slowly, like a person walking, it waved its gaunt arms in the blackness above it.

Then, though my body was like lead, my ears heard acutely as she talked and gibbered in an excitable manner.

"He is mine! He is mine!" she cried over and over. "The bonny young lad with his golden tresses! To-night I shall hold his head on my breast. I have his promise at last, my own beautiful darling!

"I will deck myself for my love!" she shrieked, then moved swiftly through the darkness to the massive mirror.

In the polished glass I could see her face even plainer than I had seen it when she passed me. There was a curious glow like phosphorescent flame that seemed to fall upon her, while the rest of the room was enveloped in darkness. Had the grave given up its dead, her flesh could never have been more hideous. Yet she gazed at herself and smiled in glee. She leered at her image and blew kisses at it from the tips of her crooked, claw-like fingers. Mumbling and gibbering, she moved to and fro, arching her scrawny neck and uplifting her shoulders.

It was as though she was studying each hideous pose and selecting the one which would best please her lover.

Then, while I gazed, she bent her head and the bony fingers began toying with the keys that dangled in a bunch at the side of the mirror.

Selecting one, she opened a drawer, which she drew out entirely, and dropped on the carpet. Again the ragged hair fell about the scrawny neck as she bent and thrust her arm into the aperture below her.

She must have touched a secret spring and discovered another drawer in the interior of the dresser, for a moment later she withdrew her hand fairly overflowing with precious jewels.

Over and over she returned to the drawer, bringing forth each time more exquisite treasures, and then breaking forth into peals of shrill laughter, she began decking her forehead, her neck and fingers.

"He will love me now!" she cried with pride, "when he sees the glitter of my costly trinkets! There are few who have diamonds and pearls like these—I will wear them to-night in my true love's honor! Oh, false, false men—I have probed your secrets—I have learned your natures through years of sorrow! Beauty is your god, and wealth your master! See! I am blessed with wealth and beauty; can you not love me now, my bonny darling?"

There were diamonds and rubies shining in her hair, and her breast was ablaze with its mass of jewels.

Suddenly she threw her arms above her head, twirling and twisting them in fantastic contortions.

The gems on her brow seemed to shake and quiver; her bosom rose and fell in a rhythmical manner.

Like a flash of lightning it crossed my brain—she was dancing for joy, this unearthly old creature.

Flinging up her arms, she burst forth into song, her strident voice grating harshly on the air in time to the measure which her arms were beating.

"Haste, my love, the hour is near;
See, I deck myself to please thee!
Come, love, come, I wait thee here,
Love with kisses soon shall tease thee!
See the bright-eyed gems awaiting,
See the lips thou soon shalt press!
Midnight is the time for mating,
Hasten to thy bride's caress!"

The hideous song ended in a hollow laugh, and the motions of the head and bosom gradually subsided.

What next would she do? I stared in horror. The ghostly dance had nearly bereft me of reason.

Slowly the long arms were extended before her, and the head began swaying with a different motion, which was as unmistakable as the other. It did not need the mockery of her raven's croak to see that she was crooning a lullaby, and rocking in her arms an imaginary baby.

Never shall I forget that sight! My God! It is before me at this very minute!

Mad with the passion of love, she sang, or rather croaked, as to a sleeping infant. Hushing and cooing as a mother would, she rocked and soothed it on her scrawny bosom.

Suddenly she stopped in her cradle song—it was evident that she was done with her motherhood's fancies.

Breathlessly she glided back to the mirror, and with husky tones continued her talking.

"Aha! My cunning shall conquer yet! He shall love me! He shall—my bonny darling!

"Do you care for rubies, my pet?" she cried, as she clasped a fire-red bracelet on her skeleton wrist, "or is it sapphires like these that will give you most pleasure?

"Aha! He is young and proud, the lad I love, but I shall feel the throb of his heart on my own. To-night! To-night—he shall be my husband!"

She tossed her arms far above her head; the flash of her jewels lit the apartment.

"Hark! Whose was that footstep?" she suddenly screamed, then, like a frightened thief, kept still and listened.

Gliding by me again towards the outer door, the head, arms and bosom came close within my vision.

With the gems in her locks, they looked grayer than ever, and each hair stood out stiffly, like a fragment of metal. Her eyes were rolling in a frightened way. She was gnawing her chin with the fang that was longest.

Close to the door she placed her ear, then withdrew it again and hurried back to the mirror.

"It is he! It is he!"

She was muttering now, but my ears were so tense that they caught every whisper.

"He has come, my beloved! I know his dear step!"

She jerked at her jewels in the delirium of happiness.

Had he come? I listened in vain for a step. I was mad with the longing to witness this meeting!

In the horror of the scene I had comprehended it all, but its gruesome fascination I could not fathom.

She was a wretched old woman of miserly wealth, who had eaten out her heart with misguided passion. She loved a young man and would wed him, she said.

Was it her or her jewels that he longed for?

I wondered.

He was coming. I knew it by the joy in her face and by the way she extended her arms in welcome.

The rubies flared on her breast as she moved; the emeralds gleamed like the eyes of a dragon.

Turning until she faced the outer door, she stood, half gasping, in her mad exultation.

I saw the lean arms rise to encircle his neck, and the hideous lips protrude as though she would kiss him. In the rapture of the moment she seemed to forget her jewels.

But in one brief moment her joy had fled, and with the miser's instinct she was guarding her treasure.

Had he turned upon her then in this moment of her bliss? She shrieked like a fiend as she darted from him.

Scream after scream pierced the air, awakening into life every slumbering echo. Shriller and sharper rose that blood-curdling cry from the dry, rasping throat of this hideous vision.

"Murder! Help! Murder!"

The cry filled my ears.

"Save me!"

The cry thrilled my marrow with horror.

Even in her terror she returned to the mirror—it seemed as if she was guarding the secret drawer while she struggled with her ghostly assailant.

The face of the mirror still reflected her features, but, merciful God! What a horrible picture!

Like one whose throat had been clutched in a merciless grasp, she strangled and choked till her temples were livid.

There was madness in the stare of those fast glazing eyes as they turned toward the thing that had thus come upon her.

Fiercely the long, bony arms beat the air. I could see the skeleton fingers as they clawed into darkness.

Was she struggling with him whom she so blindly adored, or was it some foe who had intruded upon her?

Fainter and fainter her cries rent the air—she was choking again, I could hear her death gurgle.

I strained my hot eyes for a sight of his face—I would have given my life for a glimpse of his person!

How had he entered, and what was his shape? The strain on my brain was almost driving me frantic.

But the woman alone was all I could see—the hideous old head and the trunkless bosom.

Lower and lower bent the wizened neck, as though with the presence of his weight upon it.

The lank, bony arms were losing their strength. With a horrid groan, she gave up the struggle.

Down the old head fell with a dying grimace, and the unearthly vision was swallowed up in darkness.

After it was over my strength revived; the blood began slowly to flow through my members.

Rising to my feet, I struck a match, then slowly crept over to the scene of the struggle.

On my hands and knees I traversed the spot, finding no sign or vestige of the woman.

A sigh of relief escaped my lips as I rose to my feet before the mirror.

In another moment I was fumbling with the keys that still dangled in their place beside the glass, and even in my terror of limb and brain I promptly selected the one which I had seen the woman use when she discovered the hiding-place of her jewels.

Passing my hand over the surface of the dressing-case, I found every drawer in its proper position, but, just as I had seen her do, I drew out one drawer and dropped it gently upon the carpet.

Then, thrusting it in my hand, I explored the cavity. In a moment I had found the secret drawer; I tried the key; the drawer flew open!

What my fingers touched I could not see, but I knew by the feeling that they were precious jewels.

Rings, brooches and necklaces, I drew them forth, and even the reflection of my feeble match made them shine and sparkle with resplendent luster.

In a fever of excitement I continued my search until I was confident that not a gem had escaped me.

But my limbs were trembling as with an ague chill; I dared not remain there a moment longer.

How I reached the road I do not know, but reaction of some kind must have followed promptly, for I was found, they tell me, lying unconscious in the road, my pockets fairly bulging with the mysterious jewels.

THE CROYDEN CASE

A Detective Serial

BY POLICE CAPTAIN HOWARD

CHAPTER SIX

THE PASSAGE OF THE FORGERY ACT

THE Easter holidays had passed. Both houses of Parliament were now in session. William Rupel had fully recovered from the wound which he had received in the duel and was now in his seat in the House of Commons. Clarence returned from London and was now spending a short time with his mother at Croydon Abbey. Lady Anne and William had established a truce between one another, and although her ladyship hated the new knight, still at the same time she did not show her hatred openly, for fear that he might use his authority and compel her and her son to leave the abbey, which was now acknowledged to be William's property, since his father's will had been recorded.

When William recovered from his wound he said nothing to Clarence about the duel, and to all appearances he treated him the same as if nothing had ever happened between them. Clarence was very deferential toward his step-brother whenever they met, which was very seldom, and, to a casual observer, it seemed as if the members of the family were living in happines. But for all this appearance of tranquillity there was a strong undercurrent at work. Lady Anne and Clarence held long conferences in William Rupel's absence from the abbey, and this was owing to the fact that Clarence had taken his mother into his confidence and revealed to her everything relating to his plot against his step-brother, all of which received her heartiest approval. He had been compelled to do this on account of his shortness of funds. He received the £500 from his mother and had given it to Ben Sherman, who as yet had not done anything in the way of carrying out his part of the contract. This man's demands for money had become so frequent, and Clarence, being afraid to forge his brother's name, as suggested by Fred Kissam, in a moment of desperation, one evening after he had heard his mother express a wish that she would be glad if something would happen to kill William, told of the compact which he had made with Ben Sherman. Lady Anne listened to what her son had to say, and when he was through speaking, she said:

"Clarence, if I thought that this scheme would be successful I would give you all the money that belongs to me."

"It can't help but be successful," rejoined her son, in a tone of confidence, now that he saw that his mother did not disapprove of what he had been doing.

"Don't you think that there will be some danger of our being found out?" asked her ladyship.

"None whatever, mother; all we will have to do will be to pay Ben Sherman the money, and he will accomplish the deed of getting William away a prisoner."

"Why has he not done it before this?"

"He says he wants to wait a short time until after the adjournment of Parliament. If he should do it now, while William is so prominent before the public, there will be a great hue and cry raised, and all the detectives in the kingdom will be put on the case; but if he waits until Parliament adjourns there will be a better chance, and the risks will not be as great as they would be if he should do anything now."

"The man undoubtedly is correct. Let him have what money he desires, but don't mention my name to him."

"I shall not."

"Clarence," said her ladyship, when he was about to leave the room, "there is another matter that I have wanted to speak to you about for some time."

"What is it, mother?"

"You remember what I told you about the scene in Margaret Fuller's room the day she died, and how that Hoffman prevented me from destroying the will."

"Yes."

"Well, ever since then I have been afraid of that fellow, and afraid that he will say something about my actions on that occasion."

"What if he does? You can deny it."

"I wonder if he has told William?"

"I think not. I don't see why you should be afraid of him."

"But I am, and if there were any means of getting him out of England also, I would be willing to pay well. If anything should happen to William I am afraid that his suspicions would be aroused."

"Mother, if you say for me to tell Sherman about this I will do so."

"If you can arrange with him without any risk you can do so."

"All right. I will see that he does not annoy you, and in a short time you will have no occasion to be afraid."

"Can you trust this man whom you call Ben Sherman?"

"He is safe, and as long as we fee him well he will act squarely."

"Well, remember and be cautious."

"I will."

This was said as Clarence was leaving the room. He went to his own apartment, packed a valise, and that evening found him in London, safely lodged in his city apartments. Immediately on his arrival he despatched a messenger to Ben Sherman, and asked him to call without delay. Fred Kissam had been taken into Clarence's employ, and was now acting as his valet. So matters stood at the opening of the Houses of Parliament. Mr. Hoffman was in London helping his friend, whose duties had become so numerous that he was compelled to employ four secretaries.

William Rupel was becoming more and more popular every day. The papers were loud in their praises of the

numerous reforms which he had brought before the House. Even those of the opposition acknowledged that he was a great reformer and that he was doing a great deal of good for the working classes.

At last, about a month after the House had opened, William introduced a bill, the contents of which set every one in the whole kingdom talking about him and set party feeling running very high. Now some praised his intentions, while other denounced them. The bill was to change a law that had been in existence for hundreds of years, and was known as "The Great Forgery Bill." Before this the law in England was, in regard to a person who forged another's name, that the forger should be punished by being publicly executed. William Rupel desired to change the law so that instead of suffering death the malefactor would be imprisoned for life. The great statesman was untiring in his zeal to have his bill passed. He worked night and day among the members of both Houses, until at last, a few days before the bill was called up, he was assured by Mr. Hoffman that he thought the great measure would be carried by a large majority. Still, William was not certain. He had canvassed public opinion pretty thoroughly, and saw that he would be compelled to override a great deal of general superstition, and he spent days and nights in preparing himself to meet all the arguments that any opposition might bring forward. The day that the bill was to be called arrived. The lobbies, the galleries and even the floor of the House were packed with people. The crowd extended for an area of two blocks outside of the House, all anxiously waiting to hear what the decision of the lower House would be. At last the bill was called. William Rupel arose to his feet and addressed the House—Mr. Hoffman was by his side. The minute he commenced to speak a pin could have been heard to fall, everything was so quiet, and it continued so for the two hours that he was speaking. Every one was all attention, and followed him closely. With impassioned eloquence he went on, interrupted now and again with loud applause.

The argument was a masterpiece of learning, and when he finished not a murmur of opposition was heard. Such a great speech had not been listened to for years, and murmurs of admiration were heard from all quarters. The bill passed the lower House with only ten votes against it. When this was announced loud cheers rent the air, and William Rupel's constituents crowded around him, offering all kinds of congratulations. But his work was not through yet. The bill had to go to the House of Lords. He went before that body, and his speech there was even a greater masterpiece than his one in the House of Commons. The bill passed without one dissenting voice, and now went to the queen. What would Her Majesty do? Would she veto it? These and hundreds of other questions upon this important topic were discussed daily by long-winded editorials. William Rupel waited in anxiety. To him it seemed as if he had been pleading for his own life, and he was waiting with anxiety to know what the sentence would be—life or death.

The night after the bill passed the House of Lords, William was sitting in his apartments, talking with his friend, the Rev. Mr. Hoffman.

"Do you know, Frank, that I am afraid the queen won't sign the bill," he said, after a short silence.

"I don't see any reason why she should refuse to sign it. It is the greatest humanitarian measure that has been brought before Parliament for years. By the way, Will, how did you ever come to decide to make the effort to change the law?" asked Mr. Hoffman.

"I was examining the criminal code one day, when this law struck me as being not only unjust but cruel, and then and there I determined to make an effort to have it changed," answered William, and as he said this, a shadow of pain came over his face, he rested his hand on his bosom and sighed heavily. So heartrending was the sigh that Mr. Hoffman looked up in surprise and was just about to ask what was the matter, when the stillness of the room was broken by three raps at the door.

"Come in," said Rupel, as he arose from his chair.

The door opened and a servant entered, bearing upon a silver tray a neatly perfumed note. William took the note, opened it and read the contents. Turning to the servant, he asked:

"Who brought this?"

"A man in livery."

"Is he waiting for an answer?"

"No, sir; he just left the note and said to hand it to you."

"All right; you can go."

When the servant had left the room, William turned to Mr. Hoffman and said:

"Frank, here is an invitation from the Countess de Bouillon, inviting you and myself to her reception to-morrow evening."

"Who is the Countess de Bouillon?" asked Mr. Hoffman.

"Haven't you ever heard of the countess? Oh, I forgot, Frank, that you have spent very little time in London for the past few years. Why, the Countess de Bouillon is a very charming lady, whom I had the pleasure of meeting last summer at a watering-place in France. She is an American heiress and married a French count. The count died; the countess came to London, opened as establishment, and is now one of the leaders of fashion. Her salon on reception days is crowded by the notables of both parties, all the literary lights, artists, musicians, etc. I'll accept the invitation and you will go with me to-morrow. The change will help to divert my mind for a few hours."

"But how did the lady know my name?"

"Oh, I have mentioned your name two or three times when I have been talking with her, and she, knowing that you were in the city, has invited you to call with me."

"Then you are a frequent visitor at her house? Oh, I see now how the land lies," exclaimed Mr. Hoffman, as he saw his friend's face change color. "I shall go with you to-morrow evening and then I shall let you know what I think of the lady of your choice."

"You mistake me, Frank; indeed you do," said William hurriedly. "I have not proposed to her or mentioned one word of love."

"But you intend to do so?"

"Perhaps."

"It is all the same, then. I shall let you know, at all events."

"I feel kind of tired of this close room; let us go and take a quiet stroll," suggested William, as he took a cigar from the mantel and commenced to smoke.

It was early in the evening when the great statesman and his friend left the house and started off in the direction of Temple Bar.

The morning after Phil Roach, the detective, overheard the conversation in the slums, he commenced his work to try and find out what that conversation related to; all his efforts so far had proved of no avail. He had kept Ben Sherman under close surveillance, but had not been able to connect him with any crime. He knew that "The Customs" was frequented by the most desperate characters, but that was about all. He had not been able to find out who the veiled woman was. The countess, after she had been drugged on the night when Clarence Rupel and Fred Kissam visited the saloon, had been more cautious about her coming and going. Now she never entered the slums unless she was so thoroughly disguised that no one could tell who she was.

On the evening that William Rupel and Mr. Hoffman had started out to take a walk the Countess de Bouillon, after she had sent her note to the great statesman, also started out, and went in the direction of Temple Bar. She had disguised herself as an old beggar woman, and so complete was her make-up that even the most searching could not discover but what she really was what she pretended to be. On her arm she carried a basket and in her other hand a cane. Her hair was gray and straggly, and every step she took she trembled like as if she had the palsy.

Another person had also started for Temple Bar on this evening, about the same time as the parties whom we have just mentioned. That party was Phil Roach, the detective. On this particular evening he had very little to attend to, so he concluded to visit the slums. He also assumed the disguise of a beggar. As he was crossing the Bar he ran into the old beggar woman just as she was about to solicit alms from William Rupel.

"Axin' yere honor's pardon, but won't ye give a poor man a few pence to pay for the cost of a night's lodgin'?"

The detective looked up into the face of the man before him; he started back and said to himself, "Sir William Rupel." The name was mentioned aloud almost by his side. It was said in a whisper, but what he heard made him look around in surprise. What he heard was this:

"Sir William Rupel. He little dreams that £2,000——"

The sentence was not finished.

As Phil Roach looked around he saw no one except the old beggar woman, who was hobbling away at a fast rate.

"Did ye speak, yer honor?"

"No, my man, I did not," answered the statesman.

"Thanks, yer honor," said the detective as he turned to go, forgetting about the alms asked for. He was going off when Rupel stopped him.

"Have you forgotten your alms, my man?"

"Thanks, thanks, yer honor, may a thousand pleasant dreams encompass yer bed."

With that Roach took the half sovereign and walked off. He saw the beggar woman crossing the street and he determined to follow her.

"I could not have been mistaken. I heard the words distinctly, 'Sir William Rupel — he little dreams that £2,000——' That sentence was not finished. Whoever uttered it did not mean for it to be overheard. No one was near at the time but that beggar woman, and I think that she must have been the one who spoke. I will follow her and see where she goes. Can it be that I have at last struck a clue which will help me to solve the problem on which I have been working for so many weeks."

With that the detective followed after the countess. When Phil passed away William turned to Mr. Hoffman and said:

"Frank, that beggar was a curious fellow. He was going off without his alms. I don't think that he was really what he pretended."

Rupel and Mr. Hoffman, after taking a short walk, went back to their lodgings, little dreaming that they had been so near to the countess and that the famous detective of Scotland Yard had discovered a clue that interested them greatly.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A FIGHT AT THE CUSTOMS

ACROSS Temple Bar, down one street and up another, through dirty, narrow lanes, until The Customs was reached, Phil Roach, the sleuth-hound of Scotland Yard, followed the old beggar woman. She seemed to notice that she was being followed, for she led the detective a long race, and several times tried to throw him off the scent by dodging into doorways and waiting until she thought that he had passed, when she would emerge and go off in another direction. At last she thought that she had got rid of her pursuer, and she hurried toward The Customs as best she could. She straightened up and assumed her regular walk. When she thought that the person who was following her had missed her, she was greatly mistaken.

When Roach came out of the alley the beggar's costume had disappeared, and he was attired as a workingman. He passed the beggar woman and walked on ahead of her, now that they were near The Customs. As he suspected, the woman entered, and a few minutes after she closed the door the detective followed and sat at one of the tables in the back part of the saloon. He ordered a drink and noticed that the woman stopped a few minutes at the bar, said something to Ben Sherman, and then went to the barroom, where, in a short time, the proprietor of The Customs followed.

The partition of the room was thin, and, by sitting close to it, Roach could hear almost everything that was being said in an ordinary tone of voice.

"Well, Nell, how are matters progressing in upper tendom?" Ben Sherman said, as he entered the room and closed the door after him.

"All right," gasped the countess.

"Why, girl, what has caused you to be so short of breath?" queried Sherman, as he looked at his sister.

"I have had a long way to come, and then, besides, I was followed," she said.

"Followed—by whom?"

"I don't know. The fellow was disguised as a tramp."

"Where is he now?"

"I gave him the slip."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, perfectly."

"Did you look at him closely?"

"I did when we ran against one another on Temple Bar. I met Sir William Rupel, and was about to ask for alms when this man came in between me and the statesman."

"Who did the fellow look like?"

"Now that I come to think of it, his eyes looked like those of Phil Roach. You know what peculiar eyes Roach has."

"Phil Roach!"

Just at this instant a noise was heard in the saloon.

"Down the guy! Knock his head off! Pummel him! Kill the spy!"

Bang! bang! bang!

"Back, all of you, or I will riddle you with bullets!" cried the detective, as he dealt the barkeeper a fearful blow between the eyes, which knocked him senseless. When Ben Sherman opened the door, everything was in confusion in the saloon. About a dozen men were standing in various positions; some with chairs in their hands grasped by the backs, others with loaded pistols pointed at the breast of the detective, and all glaring at him like so many wild beasts.

"What's the matter?" queried Ben Sherman, as he entered the room and beheld the scene. He turned and looked at the detective—he looked a second time, and then he started and exclaimed:

"Phil Roach!"

"Yes, Phil Roach!" exclaimed the detective, who never flinched once.

"Onto him, boys! Don't let the fellow leave here alive!" cried Ben Sherman, as he pulled a pistol from his pocket and fired it straight at Roach's head. The detective stepped aside, and the ball passed by harmlessly.

Shots came from both sides. Three men fell, and still the detective remained on his feet.

"Down with him!" yelled Ben Sherman, towering over with rage.

"Stand back!" cried the detective in return, as some of the crowd made a motion as if they would close in on him.

Ben Sherman fired his pistol again, and then, lifting a chair in his hand, he rushed upon Roach with all the fury of a madman. The ball passed near to the detective's head, but had no effect. The detective noticed the movement of his antagonist, and, grasping a stool that was standing by his side, he held it in readiness to ward off the coming blow.

Crash!

The chair in the hands of the detective fell in pieces to the floor, together with that in the hands of his assailant. With a curse Ben Sherman now closed in on Roach and clutched him by the throat. The two swayed back and forth, knocking over chairs, tables and everything else that stood in their way.

"You sneak, you! You will spy, will you?" hissed the saloon-keeper through his teeth as he tried to disengage his arm and strike the detective in the face.

A mishap had revealed Roach's presence in the saloon while he was listening at the partition; his chair had broken from under him and had thrown him to the floor. The sudden jar had knocked the wig from his head, and before he could replace it the barkeeper recognized him and called to the men, who were sitting at the table, to help him.

Roach saw that his life was in imminent danger, and that he would have to fight if he wanted to get out of the place.

Roach managed to dodge all the blows that Ben Sherman tried to level upon his head, and at last, by a quick twist of his body he threw his assailant on the floor. Seeing that the others were about to close in on him and knowing that unless he got out of the den quickly, they would soon overcome him, he jumped into the center of the crowd, struck out with both fists, and before any of the men could recover from their surprise, he was out of their reach and safe in the street. On the corner he met two policemen, and, telling them who he was, he said:

"Come with me. I want to arrest a woman in that saloon."

The policemen obeyed, but when they reached the door of The Customs everything was dark. Phil tried the knob of the door and found that the key had been turned in the lock. Not waiting to demand admittance, Roach threw himself against the door and broke it in. When he and the officers entered everything was in darkness. They lit a lamp and found that the place was deserted. The gang had done quick work. They had carried off their wounded companions and the barkeeper, and had made their escape.

For some time Phil Roach and the officers searched the premises, but failed to find any of the men. They discovered that the crowd had escaped through a back window, but that was all.

"One of you watch this place until to-morrow," ordered the detective when he was about to leave.

"All right," rejoined the man as he closed in the iron shutters in the rear of the saloon.

"Hello, what is this?" exclaimed Roach, when he was about to go out of the front door. He stooped down and picked up a lady's fine cambric handkerchief. He held it up to the light and discovered that it had a name written in the corner. On looking at it closely he read aloud:

"'Countess Amelia de Bouillon.' I wonder how this came here?" he mused. "Can it be that the countess' house has been robbed. I'll preserve it, and perhaps it may prove to be of some value." So saying, he placed the handkerchief in his pocket and left the saloon with the intention of going to headquarters, reporting the row, and getting out a warrant for Ben Sherman for keeping a disorderly house.

Phil had not gone far, and while he was passing by a dark alley he was grasped from behind, and before he could offer any resistance he was borne to the ground, gagged and bound. The two men who had thus overcome the detective carried him through the alley until they reached the end, which led into a street facing the water. They stopped before a large tenement-house and rapped at the door. It was opened by the countess, who still wore her disguise.

"Nell, quick! open the door!" exclaimed Ben Sherman, who, together with Fred Kissam, had thus attacked Roach and made him a prisoner.

They carried the detective into the room which Ben had called the "Crib," and threw him down into a corner. On looking around Phil discovered that the only occupants of the room were the woman and the two men.

"Sit down, Nell," said Sherman, as Kissam and he took seats at a table, in the center of which was a bottle of liquor, with three glasses standing by its side.

"Let us take a drink and then to business. We must be quick, as I have a job on hand to-night," Sherman exclaimed as he picked up the bottle and filled his glass with the liquor. His companions followed his example, and then said:

"We will have to get rid of this fellow in some way. What do you think is best, Nell?"

"It will not do to kill him. See if he won't agree to not say anything about the affair to-night if we will let him go," answered the countess.

Sherman leaned over the table and whispered in his sister's ear:

"Nell, I don't think it will be safe to let him go. How do you know but what he knows some of our plans already?"

"True, true; I never thought of that."

"We will have to make way with him then," said Ben Sherman decidedly.

"Not if he knows himself!"

The countess and the men turned around in surprise, and were astonished to see Roach standing in the corner with two pistols in his hands, each of which was pointed at them.

The detective, while they were talking, had managed to loosen his hands from the cords which bound them. When this was done it was an easy matter to take the gag from his mouth. Disregarding the pistols which Roach had them covered with, Sherman pulled a knife from a belt that encircled his waist, and made an attempt to reach the detective.

"One of us must die," cried Ben, aiming a blow at the detective. He was so enraged that he did not take time to see what he was aiming at, but struck out at random. Roach was perfectly cool and managed to dodge every blow with the greatest of ease.

The detective's left arm fell helpless to his side as a bullet from Fred Kissam's pistol struck him in the shoulder. So intent had he been watching his assailant that he did not notice what the woman and Fred Kissam were doing. Seeing now that he was in a close place and hearing a number of feet tramping along the hall and supposing them to be members of Ben Sherman's gang, the detective concluded that the best thing that he could do would be to make good his escape before any assistance came to his assailants. Accordingly, he took a hasty aim with the pistol in his right hand, and fired at Fred Kissam. The ruffian gave a despairing cry of anguish and fell across

the table, upsetting the liquor and breaking the glasses. Phil followed this up by a heavy blow at Ben's head, which knocked him senseless, and he fell in the opposite corner of the room. The detective then jumped to the door. He turned the knob and found it locked. The key was gone. Every minute the tramping of feet along the hall drew nearer and nearer. Not a moment was to be lost. He turned to the countess, who was standing by the table, and said:

"Where is the key?"

"I don't know," replied the woman; and at the same time a smile of triumph passed over her face. She had heard the tramp of feet and she hoped that the members of the gang would arrive in time to thwart the detective.

"You lie!" cried Phil; "you have that key in your pocket, and if you don't give it to me instantly I will not hesitate to shoot you!"

He stepped to the woman's side and placed the muzzle of the pistol close to her temple.

"Are you going to give it up?"

"No!" said the countess decidedly.

"Then die!"

Click! went the hammer.

"Hold! Don't shoot. Here's the key!" cried the countess as she held the key in her hand.

Roach jerked it from her, inserted it in the lock, and flung open the door. He then darted into the hall and closed the door after him, locking it from the outside. The men whom he had heard enter the house were now within ten feet of him. None of them had seen him as yet, although they had heard the noise of the struggle within the room.

"Hurry!" cried the leader of the gang, which numbered about fifteen; "something is up!"

Roach, when he left the room, noticed that there was a closet opposite to it in the hall, and that the door was standing open. He darted into this and closed the door a minute before the leader of the gang came up.

The man tried the door of the room where his companions were confined.

"Ben, open the door!" he cried as he tried the knob and found that the door had been locked.

"We're locked in, Joe," answered the countess. "Break it down! That sleuth-hound, Phil Roach, has knocked Ben senseless and escaped."

The door was broken down and the men entered the room. When the countess related all that occurred, the men became greatly excited. Some of them then went and searched the house, but could find no trace of Roach. The minute after the last man entered the room the detective slipped from the closet and made his way in a hurry to the street.

He had not gone far when a cry of help was heard issuing from the hallway of a house at the end of the street. Although his arm pained him fearfully where he had been wounded, he did not wait to consider what might be the result, but rushed in the direction from which the cry came. He reached the house, but everything was now quiet. Undaunted, he took his pistol in his right hand and entered the hall. He heard a noise in the upper hall as if a struggle was going on and then he heard the smothered tones of a woman's voice.

He hastily mounted the stairs and when he reached the upper landing he saw two rough-looking men trying to drag a young woman along the passage, while she was struggling with all her strength to free herself from their grasp.

"Stop that!" cried Roach, as he dashed upon one of them and knocked him senseless.

The other let go of the young woman and turned upon the detective. The detective dealt him a stinging blow on the temple, which made him fall to the floor as if he were dead.

By this time the noise of the encounter had aroused the inhabitants of the house, who were coming down the stairs. Not wishing to encounter any one else, Phil Roach turned to the young woman and said:

"I am a detective. Follow me and I will save you from any further assault."

She obeyed, and they left the house together, before any of the people reached the scene of the encounter. The detective led the way until they reached Scotland Yard, where he ushered her into a private office. The young woman was well dressed, but her clothes were torn from the struggle through which she had passed a short time before.

She was of an ordinary build, dark-complexioned, and had an air of refinement about her which told the detective that she did not belong to the class that the men did from whom he had rescued her.

"Take a seat," said Phil after they had entered the office, "and when you get rested you can tell me all about yourself and what was the cause of this assault."

The young woman took the proffered chair, and now for the first time she had a good look at the detective. Her eyes fell upon Roach's wounded arm and she instantly exclaimed, as she arose from the chair and went up to his side:

"Oh, sir, you are wounded and your arm is bleeding. Can I do anything for you?"

Up to this time the detective had not looked at the wound, and now that his attention was called to it he found that his sleeve and hand were covered with blood. He now said to the young woman:

"I will go and have this dressed and will return in a few minutes. The wound is only a flesh one."

He left the room, and in a short time returned with it bandaged and another suit of clothes on.

"Now, if you will kindly tell me your name I will listen to what you have to say, then if I can do anything for you I will willingly aid you in anything which you may propose," said Phil as he seated himself at the desk and prepared to listen to the young woman's story.

"I don't know how I can ever repay you for the service that you have rendered me," replied the young woman.

"It was my duty," said Phil in an offhand manner.

"Will you please tell me where I am?" asked the young woman.

"You are at Scotland Yard."

"Thanks. Now I will relate all about what happened to me this evening."

"All right; I'm all attention," said Phil as he placed some paper before him and prepared to take notes of what she was going to say.

"My name is Lady Jane Austen," continued the young woman, "and I reside at Croyden, the home of Sir William Rupel."

"Do you know Sir William?" interrupted the detective.

"Very intimately."

"Were you at Croyden to-day?"

"No; for the past three weeks I have been spending some time at my aunt's. This afternoon I received a note from the Countess de Bouillon asking me to come and take tea with her. I met the countess abroad last summer, and, having no other engagement, I thought that I would avail myself of this opportunity and renew the pleasant acquaintance that we had formed."

"Who is this Countess de Bouillon?" queried Phil.

Lady Jane told the detective all that she knew about the countess and then continued:

"I called upon the countess and we spent a very pleasant

time together, talking about old acquaintances and so on, until it grew quite late, when I said that I must go home. As it was quite late, the countess sent a servant to call a carriage to take me home. When the carriage arrived, I bade the countess good-by at the door and entered the vehicle. I had no sooner done so when I was grabbed by two men who were seated within, and gagged, so that I could not call for assistance. The door of the carriage was closed after I entered, the driver whipped up his horses and drove away at a furious gait. The conveyance never stopped until it reached the street in which the house was, where you found me. When the men were taking me out the gag became loose from my mouth and I was able to cry for help. These cries brought you to me, and you know what followed. The whole proceeding is strange and I cannot understand what these men wanted to abduct me for."

Lady Jane stopped talking and looked at Phil, who had his head resting upon his hand and was thinking deeply.

"I cannot understand the motive of these men," said the detective, "but you may rest assured that some plot is at the bottom of the whole affair. I will now call a carriage and see you safely home. To-morrow I will investigate the matter. Say nothing to any one about what happened to you."

"I will act as you direct," said Lady Jane.

The detective and her ladyship drove to the young lady's aunt. When they arrived at the house it was past midnight. As they entered the parlor the whole household was gathered together and greatly excited about Lady Jane's non-return. William Rupel and Mr. Hoffman were there also. After their walk they had returned home, and just as they were about to enter the house they were met at the door by one of Lady Cathcart's servants, who handed Mr. Hoffman a note.

The curate read it and then said to William Rupel:

"Will, this is a note from Lady Cathcart, in which she states that Lady Jane went to visit the Countess de Bouillon this afternoon and has not returned. They sent to the countess', but found that Lady Jane left there some hours ago. Lady Cathcart desires to see me immediately."

"I'll go with you," answered William.

The two then went to Lady Cathcart's, and had been there some time when the detective and Lady Jane arrived. Mr. Hoffman was engaged to Lady Jane, and when he heard of her disappearance he was almost frantic. When her ladyship entered the parlor and saw the curate, she rushed into his outstretched arms, threw her arms around his neck and kissed him several times.

When those present had recovered their composure, the detective related all that he knew about what had happened, and then took his departure with Rupel and Mr. Hoffman.

He left them at their residence, after promising to call in the morning and talk with them more fully about the case in private.

When he was going away, he muttered to himself:

"There is a deep plot laid somewhere and by somebody that is unknown at present. I will find out what it is. I think that I am on the right track. The handkerchief in my pocket may prove to be an important clue to the unearthing of this mystery. The Countess de Bouillon—I will watch her, and perhaps she may have some connection with this. This may be a State affair."

So saying, he went on his way and soon entered his own home.

Early the next morning William Rupel received intelligence that the queen had signed his bill and that it was now a law. When he heard this he acted like a child, clapped his hands and cried for a long time.

Mr. Hoffman could not understand the strange actions of his friend. If he had he would have pitied the great statesman, who felt like a criminal who had received a pardon and been saved from the gallows.

The cares of office had so weighed upon William Rupel that his hair and whiskers had turned gray, and in appearance he looked like a man of sixty.

The next morning Phil Roach visited William Rupel, but could gain nothing from him which would help in solving the mystery. Before leaving the statesman, he said:

"You just stated, Sir William, that you were going to attend the reception that the Countess de Bouillon is going to give this evening. If you will permit me, I would like to attend you as your body-servant."

"Why do you want to go?" asked Rupel. "You may rest assured that the countess had nothing to do with the affair of last night."

"The countess may be all right and my suspicions may be wrong, but then I would like to attend this reception for several reasons."

"If you desire it so much I will let you go as my valet."

"Thanks; you shall not regret it."

The detective bade the statesman good-by. He did not tell him what he had heard the beggar woman say, or anything about his row at The Customs.

Early in the evening Phil was on hand to accompany Rupel to the countess' reception. He had so altered his appearance that when he entered the room the statesman did not recognize him.

"Well, what do you want?" asked William as he entered the sitting-room in answer to a message brought to him by the servant, which stated that a gentleman desired to see him.

"I come to see ze statesman, ze great Sir William Rupel," answered the detective, convulsed with laughter to think that his disguise was so complete.

"I am Sir William Rupel. Please state your business quickly, for I have only a few minutes to spare."

"Ze business is of ze greatest importance."

"Let me hear what it is."

"Monsieur Philip Roach sent me to say zat I will take his place."

"Why did the detective not come himself?"

"Well, Sir William, he is here," said Roach, in his natural tone of voice.

"Your disguise is perfect," said William Rupel in astonishment, "and I must say that if every one is not any more perceptive than I am, you will not be recognized."

"I am glad that the disguise is good."

"By what name shall I call you?"

"Alphonse will do."

When Mr. Hoffman came in he, too, failed to recognize the detective. When everything was ready the three started for the countess', and were among the first to arrive at the residence in Saville Row.

The countess received them with great courtesy, and after she had been introduced to Mr. Hoffman she paid the curate the most marked attention. Lady Jane Austen and Lady Cathcart were both present, and to them Mr. Hoffman devoted the most of his time. The assemblage was a brilliant one, and the countess was attired in an elaborate and costly costume. Shortly after the detective arrived, Clarence Rupel was ushered into the drawing-room. He was accompanied by his valet, Fred Kissam, who was looking pale and haggard. The bullet from Roach's pistol had only wounded him slightly and he was enabled to use his arm without much inconvenience.

(To be continued)

CURRENT NEWS

STRANGE SEEDS IN IDOL

A Japanese idol, believed to be 400 years old, has been found to contain sixty strange seeds. The idol was received by D. J. J. Dickover, Santa Barbara, Cal., from his son, who is Vice Consul at Kobe, Japan.

OLD SHOES FOR PAVING

Worn-out boots and shoes, chopped up and mixed with slag, granite, limestone, asphalt and bitumen, make fine roads. The patent on this process was issued in 1910 in England, and the roads that have been paved with the product wear well, are resilient and have little dust.

PLOUGH BY HEADLIGHTS

Promoted by the warmest December weather in the history of Montana, farmers on the Flathead Indian reservation in western Montana are ploughing by night as well as day. Railroad companies are lending them engine headlights. The wheat acreage in western Montana is nearly double that of a year ago.

FIND MASTODON TEETH

Throngs of curious persons are gathering at the home of John Dennis, near Arkansas City, Ark., to inspect the two big teeth found in a sandpit near his home, and said to be the teeth of a mastodon. That a mastodon, a huge prehistoric animal, died in this vicinity is the general belief, and an exhaustive investigation will be made under the direction of the University of Arkansas faculty.

AMPUTATES HER CHILD'S ARM

Mrs. J. B. Clarkson, of Harding County, South Dakota, was forced to amputate the arm of her little daughter, or allow the child to suffer with her arm crushed in some machinery. With the implements at hand she cut the suffering child loose, and hurriedly getting a team ready, took her to the nearest physician.

CAUGHT RABBIT IN MINE

Rabbit hunting 80 feet below the surface of the ground was the experience of George Williams, mine boss at Crawford No. 12 mine, Brazil, Ind. When Williams was preparing to leave the mine after a day's work he noticed a rabbit sitting beside the bottom of the shaft. Using a carbide lamp, he blinded the rabbit and easily captured it.

MUSKRAT MEAT FOR FOOD

Muskrat flesh is to be recommended to the National Food Administration as substitute for meats now in use, according to a report submitted to the Winona, Minn., Chamber of Commerce by local trappers. According to the report, the trappers assert 1,000,000 pounds of muskrat flesh goes to waste annually in the upper Mississippi Valley.

The trappers point out that the muskrat is a clean animal, living on vegetable food, and the flesh, when properly prepared, can scarcely be distinguished from chicken.

The meat has been offered for sale in Winona at 5 to 7 cents a pound.

HOUSE HAS HANGING WALLS

At Cristobal, in the Canal Zone, where earthquakes are not uncommon, they are building an electric station which is probably unique in its design. For the walls bear no weight, being merely hung from the roof and anchored to the ground. Their weight and that of the roof is carried on strong central columns.

REMEMBER THE DOCTOR

The estate of Samuel Warden, known in Indianapolis, Ind., as Miser Sam, has been settled. Warden was supposed to be poverty stricken, but was found to have securities and property worth more than $30,000, most of which goes to heirs in England. Warden lived many years in a shack. He left St. Vincent's Hospital $5,000, and a German home for orphans $5,000. To a physician who was kind to him he gave a valuable piece of real estate.

FELON QUARTERS EMPTY

For the first time in many weeks the felon quarters at the Yolo County jail, Woodland, Cal., were empty recently. With the departure of Joe Guerrero, convicted of bean thefts, for San Quentin, went the last of the prisoners in the felons' department.

There are but two men and one woman left in the jail. The two men are "vags," and the woman is Kate Frost, murderess, who is waiting the outcome of an appeal taken to the higher court.

A TREE 4,000 YEARS OLD

When one of the big trees in California fell, John Muir counted 4,000 rings from the heart out. That means the tree was forty centuries old. Thus it was a strong young tree when Abraham went into Egypt; it was bearing seed when Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed; it was old as America when Joseph was sold into Egypt; nearly a thousand years old when David slew Goliath, and older when Christ was born than the Christian religion is to-day!

HEAT VALUE OF WOOD

Two pounds of seasoned wood is approximately equal to a pound of coal in heat value. A cord of hickory, oak, beech, birch, cherry, hard maple, ash, elm or locust is equal in fuel value to a ton of coal. The same heat value exists in a cord and a half of sycamore, soft maple or hemlock, or in two cords of poplar, catalpa, bass wood or white pine as in a ton of coal, according to the Ohio Agricultural Experiment Station.

Farmers may cut wood for themselves or for local markets through the winter, thus using spare time for themselves and their hired men. Wood that is now wasting away might thus displace much high priced coal.

Wood lots can be cleared of waste wood at a profit, and be improved in addition. Some trees are old and decrepit, and others, like beech and maple, are spreading in growth. Useless themselves for lumber, they crowd out thrifty young trees, or prevent seedlings from starting. When such weed trees are removed, young seedlings spring up naturally and soon grow into timber of value.

$500 RESTORES MEMORY

M. S. Richardson, seventy-four years old, left his home at Centreville, Miss., to visit relatives at Cincinnati, O. When he reached Memphis, Tenn., he was bewildered by the white lights and forgot his name, where he came from or where he was going. He was taken to the city jail, and when he sat down on the side of his cot complained that his shoe hurt his foot. Removing the shoe, he drew out currency that totalled $500. Sight of the money restored his memory and he was sent back to his home in Mississippi.

IMPRISONED IN BIG TANK

Deacon Elliott D. Bronson, of Winchester, Conn., who is also the town's forest fire warden, while making repairs at the top of a ten-foot water tank which crowns a windmill on his barn, the other afternoon lost his balance and fell in. His weight broke the ice covering the four feet of water in the tank and he was held a prisoner in the chilly water for one hour and a half.

His cries for help were in vain until near supper hour, when a member of his family went outdoors to call him, and discovered his predicament. He was rescued with ladders and ropes.

SUGAR FAMINE A BLESSING

From the standpoint of hygiene and economy, changes in diet represent a positive gain, says the *Popular Science Monthly*. For instance, take sugar—a food which yields more calories per unit of cost than any other food, but which, on the other hand, gives us nothing but energy. It contains no protein and no mineral value, elements which are essential. So the present sugar shortage is a blessing in disguise, for we are obliged to substitute in its place vegetables and fruits, which are real body-building foods. Had we made this simple substitution many years ago we might have been a sturdier race to-day.

OLDEST PAPER MONEY

Here's an entry in the "oldest paper money" contest. It is a 50-cent paper bill, supposed to be issued in 1802.

The paper, now faded and worn, bears the following: "Fincastle, Virginia, July 5, 1802. The County of Botetourt will pay the bearer 50 cents, redeemable in current funds at the clerk's office of the said county, pursuant to the provision of an act of the General Assembly, passed March 29, 1802, entitled an act to provide a currency of notes of less denomination than $5 and the amendments thereon." The signature of the clerk, F. Wultz, remains quite plain.

The paper bill is the property of Frank W. Smith, proprietor of the Lindell Hotel, Leavenworth, Kan.

WONDERFUL THINGS

The most wonderful things in Nature are the smallest.

A flea leaps 200 times its own length. A six-foot man would have to jump 1,200 feet to parallel the event.

One species of fly takes 440 steps in traveling three inches and does it in half a second—corresponding to a man running 20 miles a minute.

Turnip seeds under good conditions increase their weight 15 times in a minute, and in a single day turnips in rich soil increase 15,000 times the weight of their seeds. The globe turnip's seed in a few months is enlarged by the air and soil to 27,000,000 times its original size.

There is no force more powerful than a growing squash. A squash 18 days old has been harnessed in such a way that the growing process lifted 60 pounds on a lever; 19 days later, it lifted 5,000 pounds.

PAYMASTER ROBBED OF $1,400

Walter Schmidt, paymaster and president of the Oscar Schmidt Musical Instrument Manufacturing Company of Jersey City, was held up and robbed of $1,400 in the Ravine road, Jersey City, the other afternoon. He had gone to a bank in Hoboken in company with an armed guard and drawn the money. The two men took a Jackson avenue car, alighted at the Ravine road station and started along the road.

Four robbers suddenly confronted them with revolvers. Two of them then took the cash, and keeping the victims covered, the four made their escape in the direction of Hoboken.

A FINE OLD CLIPPER SHIP

The Submarine Signal Company, of Boston, Mass., has issued its 1918 calendar, which contains a picture, with interesting data, of the fine old American clipper ship, Great Republic. This is the fifth of a series showing the development of the American clipper ship. The Great Republic was the largest clipper ship and the greatest wooden vessel ever built. She was built at East Boston by Donald McKay in 1853, and was of 4,555 tons register. She measured 335 feet in length, 53 feet wide, and 38 feet deep. She had four decks and four masts, and was designed to carry 15,653 square yards of canvas. Her foremast was 130 feet long, her mainmast 131, her mizzen 122, and her jigger 110.

U. S. DISCOVERS SECRET

The secret of making optical glass of the sort used in field-glasses, range finders and periscopes, a product for which this country hitherto has been dependent on Germany, has been discovered by the Bureau of Standards.

In announcing the discovery recently, Secretary Redfield said it was one of "essential importance to the military services of the nation." Experts of the bureau have been at work for two years and a half trying to find the right process, and additions will be made to the bureau equipment immediately so that the product can be supplied in sufficient quantities to meet the government's requirements.

CANNON ARE 567 YEARS OLD

Cannon were first used, according to the testimony of most historians, in the battle of Crecy, France, 567 years ago, when Edward III. of England and his son, Edward the Black Prince, with about 36,000 troops, defeated Philip of France with an army of 130,000 men. The French loss was 30,000, while the English loss was small. Two years before the battle Edward III. had formed an artillery train and an ordnance establishment. The guns were of the rudest make, cumbrous and inefficient, and most authorities agree that they had little to do with the great English victory at Crecy. It has been alleged that cannon were used by the Moors in the thirteenth century, by Henry III. of England during the rebellion of the Duke of Gloucester in 1267, and by the Spaniards against Cordova in 1280, but it is held by those well qualified to judge that the first unquestionable testimony of the employment of cannon was by Edward III.

The Chinese are also supposed to have had cannon before their invention by Europeans. The substitution of cannon for the old mechanical artillery was gradual and throughout the fourteenth century the main dependence was placed on machines used to hurl stones and Greek fire. Artillery science made great strides in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when brass guns and artillery carriages on wheels were invented, and iron was substituted for stone in the manufacture of projectiles.

UNCOVER SKELETON IN HEMPSTEAD PARK

While working in Fulton Park, Hempstead, N. Y., laborers uncovered a skeleton, near which was a headstone. The name on the headstone could not be made out, but the date of the burial showed that it had been placed there in 1740. This is one of the oldest burial grounds on Long Island. Some years ago all the bodies and headstones were lowered and the burial grounds made over into a public park. A chart is kept in the village hall showing where every body that was lowered, with its headstone, could be located at any time.

A FISH FOUNTAIN.

Following a recent earthquake shock which was felt up and down the Pacific Coast, an artesian well near Tulare, California, has intermittently spouted up small fish. A hundred or more of these creatures have been brought to the surface. They are about four inches long and have no eyes, in which respect they resemble fish found in Mammoth Cave, Kentucky. Biologists in the University of Southern California state that they undoubtedly come from some underground river, the course of which was altered by the earthquake so that its waters have mingled with those of the artesian well.

LACE GROWS ON TREES.

Lace grows on trees on the Isthmus of Panama, and the trees grow wild in the swamps, Captain L. W. Richards of the steampship *Norwalk* brought a fine sample, not merely as a curiosity, but to induce tests as to the probable utility of the plant or tree in this section.

When the bark of the limbs is stripped there are rolls of a filmy substance, of a texture very much like mosquito netting. The size of these layers increases with the size of the tree, the largest being about a foot in diameter. This fabric is strong and can be sewn without tearing. The natives use the stuff in making garments.

Captain Richards believes that by cultivation the tree may become very valuable, and if the lace layers cannot be enlarged some process may be perfected by which they can be joined into a fabric which will make the finest mosquito bar and may even serve for summer raiment.

WALKING ON WATER.

An Italian electrician has invented an ingenious form of water-shoe to which he gives the name of "hydro ski." Compared with so-called water-shoes or skis already on the market it differs in the method of propulsion. Unlike forms introduced in the past, the present shoes, which are canvas pontoons, are provided with two sets of cross arms or axles to which paddles are fitted to their extremities. The paddle is fastened to one pontoon by means of an eccentric axle, explains *Popular Science Monthly*, and to the other pontoon by another electric axle. Three axles are not in alignment, so that by shifting the weight of the body from one shoe to the other alternately, the paddle wheel is turned at a fair rate of speed with very little effort. Steering is facilitated by the use of a double-blade paddle, which also enables the operator to maintain his balance.

CRABS WITH HUMAN FACES.

A crab with a human face is one of the oddities to be found in Japanese waters. Not only that, but the face is surprisingly like that of a Japanese warrior in the "old, unhappy, far-off days of the past." This face is formed by the strange figuration of the crab's back. To see one of the creatures crawling on the sand is to see what apparently is a human face moving across the beach.

According to Japanese history, the nation was beset by a plague of piracy a few centuries ago, says the New York *World*. The coasts were ravaged, vessels sunk and terror spread generally by marauding sea rovers. Then the people organized a fleet and set out to exterminate the pirates. A great battle followed in which all of the freebooters were slain.

At this point legend steps in. It is said that not long after the battle the first of the crabs appeared. With advancing years the crabs increased in numbers until they are quite common. And not only do they bear the face of a fierce old warrior, but it is strangely like that of a man who had been drowned. The superstitious among the natives say that the souls of the pirates entered into the forms of the crabs.

SEVEN INDIAN SKELETONS

Skeletons of seven Indians were discovered in Wayzata, Minn., by members of Boy Scout Troop No. 83 while they were digging a hole to erect a flagpole on the crest of Bald Hill. They were bones of a man, a woman and five children. With the exception of the skulls, the bones were badly crumbled.

Arrow heads were also found. Scout Junior C. Buck has been awarded the credit of making the discovery.

It confirms the old legend, according to the members of the troop, that Bald Hill was the scene of a tremendous Indian battle many years ago. It is also considered probable that the entire hill is honeycombed with Indian graves.

If permission can be secured, the members of the troop will conduct a systematic search of the hill next spring, unless a regular archæological expedition takes charge of the investigation.

A NATURAL WONDER.

A natural wonder of the Black Hills, S. D., in the form of an ice cave, is to be developed and made an attraction for tourists. The ice cave is situated at Englewood and is one of the few natural wonders of its kind in the world.

As a unique feature among the natural attractions of the Black Hills it ranks with Wind Cave and with Crystal Cave, and in some respects is even more wonderful than either of these. The cave has developed peculiar features, which make it a most mystifying proposition.

Some ten or eleven years ago, what now is the ice cave was run as a tunnel by the late Harvey Sheffer, and had been pushed about ninety feet into the hill when work was abandoned, as no satisfactory mineral showing was encountered. The fact that it had the power of producing ice even during the hottest summer weather was not discovered until later.

In the hottest months of the year ice forms in the tunnel, sometimes to a depth of three feet, and a remarkable feature is that during cold weather the ice disappears. On the surface of the ground above the face of the tunnel is a spot which the heaviest snow is melted in winter and green grass is always found there, in all seasons of the year.

The formation of the ice is believed to be due to the through the rocks, which, coming in contact with currents presence of certain chemicals in the solutions which trickle of air, cause a lowering of temperature. Why the ice should disappear in winter is not so easily explained, unless it is that the production of a low temperature, under the circumstances, requires the presence of warm air currents in conjunction with the chemicals contained in the solutions.

ESKIMO CALENDAR

There are many strange calendars in the world, none of which is more interesting than that of the Eskimos. They also divide the year into twelve divisions and give a long native name to each. Translated, these names have the following meaning:

January, "coldest month for frost"; February, "ground cracked by frost"; March, "month of the young Jar seal"; April, "month of the young bearded seal"; May, "month of fawning"; June, "egg month"; July, "mosquito month"; August, "berry month"; September, "fading month"; October, "the month when ice forms around the shore"; November, "inland month" (when they go inland for deer); December, "ice forming month."

APPROVE KNITTED GIFTS TO TROOPS THROUGH RED CROSS

The war council of the American Red Cross is in receipt of the following statement from Secretary of War Baker and Secretary of the Navy Daniels:

"Secretary Baker and Secretary Daniels wish the people of the country to know that under no circumstances do they want to discourage our good women from knitting or otherwise voluntarily providing through the Red Cross comforts for our soldiers and sailors.

"On the contrary, both Secretary Baker and Secretary Daniels wish it clearly understood that they greatly appreciate all the voluntary efforts that are being made through the Red Cross to bring comfort to our fighting men, and thank the women of our country for this patriotic work. They request the newspapers to give the widest publicity to this expression."

WHAT WHITE SPOTS ON NAILS SIGNIFY

White patches upon the finger-nails are never seen in a perfectly healthy person.

They are more common on the fingers of women than of men. Girls who are mentally depressed, those who have an abnormal dread of some slight deformity, such as hair upon the upper lip, or the falling out of their hair or eyebrows, are generally found with leuconychia, as the condition of "marbled nails" is called by the doctors.

But one who has white spots on the nails should not become alarmed. These do not point to an early death, but are rather due to inferior nutrition and may be regarded as a warning that poor health, mental or physical, may be expected unless it be guarded against.

COMMON SENSE IN BURNING COAL

Before spending money on any of the so-called coal savers that are being put out now, it is well to know what one of the leading heating experts says about them.

"Not one person in ten," he said, "operates the draughts of his furnace properly or handles his coal to the best advantage. Every one of these so-called coal savers that I have seen is accompanied by a set of rules to be observed in using it. If a man will just read these rules and follow them, forgetting all about the stuff they come with, he will have the same results as if he used it. For these are nothing but the rules that every one ought to observe at all times in running a furnace."

This man's attention was called to a paragraph that has been going the rounds of the British press, to the effect that a solution of salt poured over coal will make it burn better and more economically. He smiled and said:

"If you want a very bright fire salt will help you, but its action is to make the coal burn more rapidly. Therefore, it is not for any one except him who does not care how quickly his supply of coal is used. It is the sodium in the salt that makes the coal burn so brightly. A bit of pure sodium dropped on water will immediately burst into flame.

"What is a sensible practice in the use of coal, however, is to sprinkle it with water before throwing it upon the fire. In some way this seems to make the coal burn to a finer ash with fewer clinkers, but I cannot explain why this is so."

ANCIENT HAIRPINS.

Women used to lose their hairpins a thousand years ago much in the same way as they do to-day. That, at least, is the impression one gets from the antiquities found a short time ago at Silchester excavations. The most interesting discovery was the building which formed apparently the principal baths of the Roman town. The exploration of the baths yielded a number of architectural fragments, including a small altar, portions of capitals and bases, part of a large basin of Purbeck marble, and some singular pieces of metal. In a filled-up hypocaust were found at least 100 bone pins, which had evidently been used to adjust the back hair of Roman women who used the baths. Probably they had been dropped in the way women throughout the ages has shed pins, and were collected by the keeper of the baths. Some of them are quite three inches long, and would make passable hatpins for the present fashion. A pair of gold earrings with uncut green gems are so bright that they look as if they might have just come out of a jeweler's shop in Bond street.

QUEER BIRTH CARDS

Styles are changing even in birth announcements. A few months ago a French poilu announced in the Paris newspapers the arrival of a son and heir in the following manner: "Since 12 o'clock last Friday I am here. Pierre Blouquet of —— Infantry is my father, and Marie, his wife, is my mother. My name is François."

Distinctly original was the announcement sent out by a certain Welsh musician when his wife presented him with a baby girl. This—the announcement, not the baby girl—took the form of four bars of music inscribed on a letter card.

The proud parents' musical friends recognized these as from the "Messiah," and being interpreted meant, "Unto us a child is born."

Some years ago a facetious Scotsman named Cash amused his friends by an intimation through the newspapers that his better-half had presented him with "a little Cash." He went on to say that as a result he would have still less cash in the future, and that the more Cash he had to keep, the less cash he would have to spend.

Sentiment was mixed with the announcement in the London *Times* a few years ago to the effect that the wife of a certain South London resident had on Friday, Feb. 14, given birth to a valentine daughter.

Of course, a facetious gossip writer immediately took advantage of the proud parents' originality and pertinently inquired whether a boy born on Shrove Tuesday would be a pancake son, or twins who saw the light first on Christmas Day a couple of plum puddings!

Combining a birth announcement with an advertisement strikes one as the last word in enterprise, and Mr. Fox, a poultry dealer, who inserted the following notice in the daily papers, should be congratulated for the novel way in which he commended his wares: "Another little Fox found its way into my establishment between 10 and 11 last night, but notwithstanding its arrival there will be no diminution in the number or quality of the geese for which my establishment has long been famous. Remember that the old Fox is always cunning in securing for business the plumpest goose."

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